University of Alberta

Exposing Myself : Reading, Translating, Rewriting Marie Nimier's *La nouvelle pornographie*

by

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Introduction

> « Ce plaisir-là, il me le vole ! C'est à moi, à moi ce foudroiement divin qui le terrasse sur moi ! je le veux ! ou bien, qu'il cesse de le connaître par moi !... » (Colette, *L'ingénue libertine*, 117)

Women's engagement in the creation of pornography and erotica has a lengthy history, reaching at least as far back as early-twentieth-century French authors like Colette whose novel *L'ingénue libertine* recounts the journey of Minne, a young woman with a naive craving for sexual pleasure that leads her on a perilous extramarital quest. Right from its documented origins, female-authored pornoerotica has been an aspect to women's literature and the related liberation movements, both sexual and feminist, that seeks to reclaim the female body and to describe its *jouissance* from a female point of view, to take back something of that pleasure stolen by a solely masculine eye (looking even further back there are Sappho's erotic poems in Greek). It is a refreshing and invigorating concept – yet, in some ways, it seems a surprisingly dated realm of literary criticism during modern times which some call post-feminist. Such has been my own impression, gradually formed while writing, reading and translating for the present translation thesis which centres on female sexuality and desire in literature and translation. Collections of women's erotic literature appear to end in the 1990s; general reviews and discussions of female erotica published after this time have been elusive; a simple glance at the attached bibliography reveals very few entries since the new millennium began. True, there is localized critical interest in individual works of French women writers like Millet's sensational *La vie sexuelle de Catherine M.* and even the unbelievably brutal *Baise-moi* by Despentes. Yet seen from a broader viewpoint, analysis

of the overall genre is strikingly slim. It begs the question: is the topic of women, pornography and literature unfashionable and outdated – like bell-bottoms and platform shoes, like the spiral perm and those glaring neon colours of the eighties? It seems that, like clothing, literary studies and criticism have their trends –fashion predominates, even though pornoerotic literature itself continues to thrive as a genre and sex has lost no footing as a daily obsession, greatly facilitated by the wonders of the Internet.[1]

It occurs to me that perhaps the circuitous route I have travelled to arrive at graduate studies (spanning well over a decade) has left me considerably behind the general women's movement. Am I still stuck on passé issues of sexuality? Have women writers and scholars tired of the experimental applications of pornoerotic literature, the protest, the reclaiming of our bodies? Or has our interest in sexuality been transformed? Marie, the narrator of *La nouvelle pornographie* remarks several times on this possibility: "En effet, les temps avaient changé. La libération sexuelle avait porté ses fruits et si…la femme se tapait toujours le repassage, il ne s'agissait plus d'une corvée mais d'une activité épanouissante (13)." And further on: "Les temps changeaient, comme le soulignait le directeur de la société Jolicoeur, les intérêts se déportaient, laissant surgir çà et là des timbres de voix différents (53)." These comments, though laced with irony, underline this apparent (d?r?)evolution in feminism and societal views on female sexuality in western culture. Just where do women and sexuality stand as we try to escape the ghettos of solidarity based solely on sex (54)? Will this relation be "moins chargée, moins saucue, plus inventive (32)"? It is an enticing question, one that Nimier seems to be toying with in *La nouvelle pornographie.* And yet, I will set aside an attempt to

[1] For an informative account of the translation of erotic material on the Internet see Sathya Rao's 2008 article "Translating Sexuality".

thoroughly define the new female sexuality (like the new pornography) for future research, as the purpose of the current study, its *raison d'être,* remains the examination of the translator's subjective and desirous relationship with a pornoerotic text like *La nouvelle pornographie* by Nimier. It seems that by beginning this introduction with a look at the origins of women's involvement in pornoerotica, I have already jumped ahead of myself –or perhaps just finally caught up.

As I will explore at greater length in the translation commentary to follow, I was, in a way, seduced into studying pornography and into translating Nimier's novel – it was like a temptation I couldn't resist, probably magnified by the taboo it represented for me. The questions examined in the following pages spring from the challenges I encountered as a translator of female-authored pornoerotica, this evolving genre of women's literature that continues to develop despite a seeming decline in academic interest in erotic literature and female sexuality. But before delving directly into the central translation discussion, I will first shine a light down a more historical route and touch on two foregrounding topics, namely: a discussion of the key terms "pornography" and "erotica" followed by a brief overview of the role of feminism in relation to the pornography debate. All of this is offered as a framework, a kind of platform from which to contemplate Nimier's novel as well as my translation commentary that follows in which I zoom in on the translator's desire for the text, the erotics of reading, writing and translating and reveal the numerous difficulties faced during the translation process.

Feminism & Pornoerotica: A love-hate relationship

Defining the terms

In this exploration of feminism and the expression of female sexuality in literature and translation, it seems to me both essential and almost inevitable to venture into the long standing debate over how to define pornography and erotica, for there is no distinct path to walk between these blurry and ill-defined terms which are often interchanged. To begin with I asked: how have other scholars of the genre defined these controversial terms? Their numerous opinions gave me much food for thought. As a first example, in her book *Mosaïque de la pornographie*, writer and novelist Nancy Huston explains that the word pornography is derived from the Greek words *porné* for prostitute and *graphein* which means "writing" (17). To Huston, the origins of the word "pornography" imply the silencing of woman because Huston claims that, historically, the writer of the female prostitute's story was a man. A slightly different interpretation of "pornography" is provided by the British scholar John Phillips in his study of French pornographic fiction, entitled *Forbidden Fictions*. According to him, *pornographos* is a Greek term for a biography of courtly life in ancient times. At its origin, this word did not have the pejorative connotations of today's usage. In his own writing, Phillips uses the word "pornography" to mean "passages or texts which contain explicit sexual material aimed at producing a particular effect of sexual arousal (6)." Claudine Brécourt-Villars, in her anthology of French erotic writing by women, elaborates and slightly expands Phillips' definition. For her, "la littérature pornographique…(est) la représentation crue, immuable, caricaturale, sinon inflationniste de la sexualité (28)."

Thus far, these definitions have excluded any sort of moral judgement about the content of pornography, but it is on this point that feminists, as well as many critics in general, make a distinction between pornography and erotica. In an essay that appeared in *Ms. Magazine* in 1978, Gloria Steinem argues that "perhaps one could say…erotica is about sexuality, but pornography is about power and sex-as-weapon (54)." This feminist definition depicts pornography as "a medium for expression of norms about male power and domination which functions as a social control mechanism for keeping women in subordinate status…(Diamond 686)." When pornography is viewed as the eroticised manifestation of male-female power relations, the distinction between it and erotica becomes essential to feminist debate.

To further expand their position, feminists against pornography (as well as those critics who favour a distinction between porn and erotica) clarify that erotica is about sexual love. For example, Gloria Steinem suggests that erotica is about "mutual pleasure" and "positive consent" (54). In fact even scholars, like John Phillips, who do not condemn pornography also uphold this "sexual love" distinction. But other scholars see the difference elsewhere. As Lucienne Frappier-Mazur writes in an article about erotic writing by women: "Eroticism…denotes a quality, and erotic texts may belong to a variety of generic categories (113)." Frappier-Mazur sees erotica as writing that "while retaining the basic motifs of commercial pornography and illustrating its formulaic model…also go(es) beyond its limits (113)." For her, even though erotic writing denotes a certain literary quality, it shares the transgressive qualities of pornography by breaking both sexual and textual norms of discourse. Erotica will even treat the same motifs that traditional pornography does. Frappier-Mazur suggest that erotica, just like pornography,

depicts the social power relations of the culture in which it is produced; thus she does not adhere to the view that sexual love creates the distinction between these two. To Frappier-Mazur, only quality of writing makes the difference.

Looking back at the history of literature, the difficulty of defining pornography and erotica becomes clear. As Brécourt-Villars mentions in the introduction to her *Anthologie de texts érotiques féminins (1799-1984),* editors compiling anthologies of erotic works can testify to the difficulty of defining the erotic versus the pornographic. In her attempts to clarify the term «érotisme» she writes:

> ...floue, fluctuante, la notion d'érotisme est difficile à cerner. Si elle échappe sans cesse c'est non seulement parce qu'elle varie avec les civilisations, les préoccupations d'une époque, ses tabous, ses censures capricieuses et arbitraires, mais parce qu'elle se diversifie également en fonction de la structure fantasmatique des auteurs, des lecteurs ou des spectateurs. Et les attitudes qu'elle provoque changent elles-mêmes, semble-t-il, en fonction des genres. (19)

Brécourt-Villars believes that erotic writing "springs from a completely different set of values (21)"[2] than pornographic writing. For her, eroticism goes beyond pornography, in a sense, because it embraces not only stories about acts of sex and possibly related violence but also "elle dégage...les formes du désir individuel, montrant que le désir qui est aussi celui du corps dans sa totalité, peut naître encore de ce qui n'est pas désigné comme directement sexuel (21)." In her mind, texts like Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* or Marguerite Yourcenar's *Anna Soror* are just as erotic as those more classically defined as such.

From these varying uses of the words "pornography" and "erotica", the only point of clarity is that erotic writing somehow goes beyond pornography whether by including the emotion of love or by having literary value in and of itself. My own preference is the

[2] My translation

neologism "pornoerotica" which denotes the ultimate impossibility of separating these two terms. In the end, while I will refrain from taking one side or another and may move from one term to another, I tend toward a blend of Frappier-Mazur's and Brécourt-Villar's definitions. In my view, what is erotic is not always about love nor even always specifically about the sexual act. As Barthes has so aptly phrased it: "le texte de plaisir n'est pas forcément celui qui relate des plaisirs, le texte de jouissance n'est jamais celui qui raconte une jouissance. Le plaisir de la représentation n'est pas lié à son objet: la pornographie n'est pas *sûre* (Barthes 2000, 120)."

Art versus Pornography – "Pornartgraphy" (Gubar 729)

The above analysis of the key terms "pornography" and "erotica" has already indirectly entered into the next twist in the argument: can pornography be art? The questions of censorship and freedom of expression, which will be examined further on, are closely tied to the decision of what constitutes art versus pornography. It can be argued that erotica (in its various forms) has artistic value and can therefore be considered synonymous for art. For feminists, the question is whether, based on its aesthetic value, pornography can be called erotica (or, in other words, art). But what are these aesthetic criteria and are the terms "pornography" and "art" mutually exclusive, comparable or identical (Gubar 714) ?

On either side of this debate, both anti-pornography and anti-censorship feminists agree that there is a blurry line between the categories of art and pornography. For example, in her book *Sexual Politics,* a key text in the "sex wars," Kate Millett exposes the patriarchal, misogynistic discourses in the erotic writings of D.H. Lawrence, Henry

Miller and Norman Mailer. In their *Minneapolis Ordinance*, Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon define a pornographic work as that which contains " 'sexually explicit subordination of women, graphically depicted, whether in pictures or in words' (quoted in Gubar, 714)." Clearly much canonical literature or art could fit into this type of definition. Using Magritte's *Le Viol (1947)* as an example, Susan Gubar recalls the controversial impact of sexually explicit surrealist art that has been defined as "antonym, synecdoche and synonym of art (724)."

Critics like Gubar see "pornography as a vanguard form of artistry" (724) and find it impossible to differentiate between art and porn. In fact, as Gubar notes, some scholars such as Susan Sontag and Peter Michelson have argued that pornography is a means to criticize dominant culture through immoral and anarchical representations. In other words, the avant-garde pornographic artist aims to make a political and social statement by transgressing limits, breaking social taboos. In this light, "pornartgraphy" plays an important role far beyond providing sexual fantasy for its consumers. Moreover, Gubar argues that pornography is "crucial for understanding our cultural past" (731) and, I would add, our cultural present. There is a need to explore and study pornography not only from the perspective of the female reader but also from that of the male writer and consumer in order to understand the "authorial motivations, historical contexts and aesthetic conventions of genres composed by and for men (731)." Gubar suggests that separating out pornography from "high" art or canonical literature has the effect of distorting our understanding of literary periods and figures. Thinking along these lines, the question of whether pornography is art or vice versa may be irrelevant. What is of import is the cultural information that can be exposed by exploring the genre.

Furthermore, looking back at the history of censorship, one can easily begin a long list of now canonical literature that was in its day of publication condemned as pornographic or obscene like Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* or Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal.* With this in mind, it seems wise to proceed with caution when labelling "pornography" and "art." However, as a look at the "sex wars" will reveal, many feminists disagree over this point.

The "Sex Wars"

"Pornography is the theory, rape is the practice." Robin Morgan
(Quoted in Sonnet, 174)

The beginning of the anti-pornography movement in the 1970s can be seen as the first phase of what eventually developed into the "sex wars" of the 1980s and later. When Kate Millett published *Sexual Politics* in 1970, she launched an attack on expressions of male hostility toward women in the form of "pornartgraphy." She was the first feminist to clearly draw a link between "sexuality and cruelty" and "the maintenance of patriarchy (Diamond 688)." Also in the 1970s, the feminist Andrea Dworkin, herself a victim of sexual abuse, took up the campaign against pornography. As Irene Diamond explains, feminists like Dworkin, Susan Brownmiller, Catherine MacKinnon and, in the UK, Catherine Itzin, argue that pornography affects the "self images of women and men (688)." To these feminists, pornography promotes an atmosphere that goes beyond just tolerating "sexual hostility" toward women – it actually condones it.

The 1976 release of the pornographic film *Snuff* about the sexualized murder and dismemberment of a woman is a significant event in the anti-pornography movement as it sparked fierce reactions among feminists and the public in general. There was considerable debate as to whether the film was a simulation of this event or live footage.

In reaction to the film, feminists organized anti-porn conferences and rallies. There were "Take Back the Night" marches and protests in areas where pornography stores were located. Anti-pornography literature proliferated.

Several years later in 1981, Andrea Dworkin published her book *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* in which she argues that pornography is a tool for male domination over women. According to her theory, pornography is more than just the cause of violence against women; it is itself a form of this violence. It is for this reason that she sees pornography as a violation of woman's rights.

A slightly different argument within the anti-pornography movement is that of feminists like Robin Morgan who proposes that the viewing of pornography causes violent behaviour against women. From this point of view, pornography blurs the distinction between reality and fantasy to the point where consumers begin to internalize and then enact the behaviours they have seen or read (Williams 17).

From a Marxist feminist side of the debate, being against pornography is also about refusing to be controlled by the power discourses that are manipulating human sexuality. For example, in her article "Pornography and Repression: A Reconsideration," Irene Diamond recalls how in the Nazi invasion of Poland, pornography was pumped into the market in order to control the population. The theory was that if individuals are solely concerned with their individual pleasures and fantasies, they are much less likely to come together to form a unified social resistance to fascism. Also within this Marxist school of thought, many feminists point out that pornography is after all a business. Therefore, the pornography debate should not be stalled on freedom of expression, thereby hiding the true motivation behind this industry – that of making money. As Germaine Greer has

written "it is...a business, a ruthless impersonal industry (quoted in Ciclitira 298)." In other words, capitalism is cashing in on transgression and on the feminist call for women's "right" to the consumption of pornography.

An uncanny result of feminism's engagement in an anti-pornography stance is its alignment with New Right and conservative religious groups that share this general condemnation of pornography. However, their union in a stance against pornography is misleading. While both agree that pornography should be banned, they differ enormously in terms of their motivations for doing so - so much so that it seems hardly accurate to ally them. Feminists are concerned about the harm to the object of pornography: women. They define pornography as an expression of power imbalance in society. On the other hand, the New Right and religious groups against porn still see it as about sex. Their concern is the moral corruption of the consumer of pornography, a loss of virtue; they condemn the use of sex for non-procreative purposes – the idea that sheer pleasure is a sin. However, feminists do not want to suppress all sexual matters – unlike conservative groups; theirs is a stance against violence and abuse, but unfortunately it has left unresolved the issue of the sexual liberation of women and their right to access pornographic materials regardless of their content. This lack of clear direction with respect to female sexuality has created a divide within feminism itself –thus, the term "sex wars."

It was in the 1980s that the anti-censorship movement began to take shape when feminists such as Pat Califia and Ellen Willis became active in order to protest against the rigid anti-pornography movement that was alienating many women from feminism by being "more punitively pol[illegible]han mainstream culture (Sonnet 170)." There was a

move to defend women's right to sadomasochistic sexuality, and anti-censorship feminists began to criticize the anti-porn faction for its racism, classism and exclusion of groups like sex workers. In addition, anti-porn campaign material that depicted pornography was labelled hypocritical and the movement itself accused of tunnel vision that overlooked the significance of other forms of discrimination and violence against women in western society.

The anti-censorship side of the feminist pornography debate can be defined generally as one that promotes openness about sexual matters. From this angle, freedom of sexual expression through pornography or erotica is seen as healthy and liberating for women. In other words, pornography has a positive role in society. This freedom to express oneself sexually is also linked to freedom of speech. In fact a central argument of anti-censorship feminism is that freedom of speech is a fundamental right of humanity as it gives us rational autonomy and access to truth. Coupled with freedom of speech arguments is the view that in order to justify censorship, one must prove that freedom to express pornography causes serious harm to someone or some group. The individual has a right to use pornography as long as this does not harm others. Furthermore, as long as pornography is controlled and limited to distribution in certain locations where those who prefer not to encounter it or ought not to (as in the case of children) are protected, then the liberal anti-censorship position is satisfied.

Taking a different anti-censorship angle, almost a pro-pornography stance, feminists like Angela Carter have argued that pornography is feminism's "unconscious ally" – like a diagnostic tool exposing the ills of patriarchal society (Gubar 728). To those of this school of thought, misogynistic writers like Sade are not to be censored but rather

to be studied and interpreted by feminists. Here is the ammunition to demand changes to sexual relations between men and women.

Other anti-censorship arguments are based on the view that proliferation of pornography is a sign of or a response to the repression of sexuality by social norms. As Judith Butler has argued in her article "The Force of Fantasy," restricting the expression of pornoerotica may only strengthen its appeal as a taboo. Furthermore, it is argued that freedom of expression through pornography and erotica would actually reduce violence against women by removing the taboo, although evidence of this phenomenon has not been conclusive (Diamond 697). Along this line of thought, it may be possible that the increase in violent pornography and literature is a backlash against feminism. Could it be that, as Ellen Willis has suggested, the increasingly powerful pornography industry has developed, as a reaction, alongside the political and sexual liberation of women (Diamond 689)? Is the proliferation of pornography an attempt to maintain the current power relations in favour of men? These are questions valid on both sides of the debate. The taboo pleasure of consuming pornography may be enhanced and made more appealing by the very groups that are opposing it, both radical feminists and the conservative New Right with aligned religious groups.

On this side of the debate, feminists reject the cause/effect argument that sex offenders are copycats mimicking what they have seen in pornography as Morgan has argued. Human behaviour is much more complex than this, as seen for example in the varying interpretations individuals have of literature and art. The impact of erotic writing on the sexual politics of its time is not so simplistic. Clearly it is difficult to outline a justified censorship of pornoerotic expression when the consumer's interpretation plays

an essential role the impact of pornography and when constantly evolving social norms are unreliable measures for judgement.

Moving into the new millennium, there is a shifting away from the polarization of the "sex wars" towards a more multidimensional approach in order to avoid the alienation of many women, due to differences of race, class and sexuality. As Karen Ciclitira proposes in her article "Pornography, Women and Feminism: Between Pleasure and Politics," it is time for feminists to acknowledge the diversity of women's experiences with pornography rather than continuing such an oppositional debate. For Ciclitira, if feminists agree that sexuality is culturally constructed and that pornography is an expression of cultural discourses about sex, we need to be concerned about messages coming through in pornoerotica. Rather than repressing this expression, Ciclitira suggests women's involvement with pornography as a way of providing alternative sex scripts and changing women's lives for the better (298).

Pornoerotic Literature in Translation

As revealed by the quote from *L'ingénue libertine* which opens this discussion, in the history of French literature, women writers as far back as the late 19th and early 20th century were involved in the writing of pornographic or erotic literature. Often these writers such as Rachilde and Colette were known not only as producers of pornoerotic texts but also as important writers of their time. As we have seen, with the development of feminism and the sexual liberation movement in the mid 20th century, women's involvement in the production of pornoerotica became part of the heated debates surrounding female sexuality. For some feminists, like Andrea Dworkin, pornography is without a doubt damaging to women. Yet for others, such as Pat Califia and Ellen Willis

who take an anti-censorship stance, women need to be free to talk about and write about sexuality in ways that appeal to women, are true to the female experience and remain inclusive of a diversity of sexual expression (Williams 23). In her book *Translation and Gender,* Louise von Flotow summarizes this complimentary role for the pornoerotic within feminism:

> Feminist writers have identified sexuality as the factor underlying these stereotypes, and have responded by breaking open these stereotypes and moving beyond these clichés. Women's sexuality and women's eroticism, described from a woman's point of view, have become a preferred area of experimentation in feminist writing. Writers have looked for and developed vocabulary for censored or denigrated parts of the female anatomy and tried to create erotic writing that appeals to women. They have responded to the challenge to 'tenter l'érotique', to attempt and tempt the erotic (17).

It is in keeping with this positive role for pornoerotica that many women writers have begun to move into the genre and moreover to play a key role, especially in the French literary system where the boundaries separating the "érographique" and mainstream literature have begun to blur. In fact, some scholars of French literature like Lucienne Frappier-Mazur[3] have even called for the inclusion of this women's pornoerotic writing within the French canon. In any case, it is clear that the importance of women's erotic writing in French has grown to the point where numerous novels are now translated into other languages, thus significantly expanding their international success. *La vie sexuelle de Catherine M.* by Catherine Millet and *L'amande* by Nedjma (an erotic novel written by a Muslim woman which has been translated into over a dozen languages in the past four years) are recent examples of this movement of French erotic and female-authored writing into the world literary system. Their translation into other languages certainly flows, at least to some degree, out of the western feminist movement to liberate women's

[3] See her 1988 article entitled « Marginal Canons : Rewriting the Erotic » which appeared in *Yales French Studies.*

sexuality. Despite the importance of this liberation, the study of pornoerotic literature and its translation would not be complete without some acknowledgement of questions related to culture and economic influences –for, as Gayatri Spivak has pointed out, world-wide "feminist solidarity" in the translation of women's literature is a questionable concept (380) in its current state. In the case of *L'amande* and its various translations, the translator walks a fine line between promoting the feminist cause and encouraging a kind of troubling orientalist voyeurism. In any case, regardless of the motivations behind the translation of a novel like Nedjma's *L'amande* and Millet's *La vie sexuelle de Catherine M.*, as a consequence of this movement to translate female-authored pornoerotica, intriguing translation issues have arisen; these are often similar to those found in all literary translation, but they have at the same time nuances unique to the genre of the pornoerotic.

As von Flotow has partly pointed out in *Translation and Gender,* there are indeed crucial questions of how to render the expression of sexuality, desire and the body in the target language (18) while keeping the new target text reader in mind. Such questions and related difficulties stem from the fact that norms related to pornoerotica (whether conscious or unconscious) vary from culture to culture. What may be racy and sexy in one can be obscene and unprintable in another. In the case of an English and a French version of a novel, the pornoerotic minds are not worlds apart, but there are nevertheless difficulties that arise for the translator in such areas as lexis, register, religious sensibility, attitudes to homosexuality, lesbianism, bisexuality and violence. Even the translator's comfort or lack of comfort with the sexual topics of the text can lead to deviations from the original (what von Flotow calls self-censorship). In this way, a study of translators'

choices when working with pornoerotic texts could point to norms governing sexuality and its expression in the source culture. As I will examine in the commentary following the translation sample, my work on Marie Nimier's *La nouvelle pornographie* has given me the opportunity to personally experience and reflect on this process from the intimate position of translator.

The New Pornography

Marie Nimier's novel, *La nouvelle pornographie,* launches somewhat abruptly into its subject with a short story written by the main character, also named Marie. It is a pornographic and dream-like story inspired by a piece of junk mail advertising a revolutionary ironing board. The story, both comical and lewd, culminates in the main character reawakening from her sexual exploits to find herself seated in front of her computer, her writing paraphernalia strewn about the table before her. Thus, without knowing it, the reader is swept right from the first page of this phantasmagoric novel into the ambiguity of its narrative voice. *La nouvelle pornographie* is a "mise en abîme," a story within a story within a story.

As a translator of this novel into English, I found that the confusion of the roles of author, narrator and character that Nimier plays within *La nouvelle pornographie* raised intriguing, parallel questions about the role of writing and of translating. As I will examine at greater length in the commentary that follows, I sensed a link between the role of the writer of pornography and the role of its translator who are both in a sense performers of the text.

The following section contains a sample translation of the first sixty-two pages of Marie Nimier's eighth novel, *La nouvelle pornographie.* (Nimier herself is a well-known

French author and also the daughter of a celebrated French writer who died tragically in 1962. Marie Nimier will be discussed further in the translation commentary to follow). This sample is offered here as a way to give the reader a taste of the text in question, in a reading situation very similar to that of a non-academic reader approaching the pornoerotic text. These particular pages were chosen not only to provide a good sampling of the potential issues that may arise in the process of translating a pornoerotic novel, but also to permit the reader to begin to develop a sense for the questions Nimier is tackling in *La nouvelle pornographie*. In the translator's commentary that follows, I will frequently refer to this section of the novel to illustrate and develop the discussion, as I examine this two-fold question of subjectivity for both the author and the translator of Nimier's novel and as well as the challenges I faced while working with Nimier's text.

Sample Translation

The New Pornography

The walls of the stairwell were peeling away, revealing a canary yellow undercoat. Aline had added her name near the buzzer. She was sleeping in the nook I had formerly used as an office. A curtain hooked up around her bed separated it from the rest of the studio: a simple piece of fabric pompously baptised her *stage curtain*, the pomp in the expression being more in what this hid from sight than in the curtain itself – the peep-show's over, Aline would say, drawing it closed, which really meant the show would now go on backstage.

The mailbox opened with a small key. An envelope fell to my feet, a windowed envelope: the President of Jolicoeur & Company was writing to me personally. As proof of his affection, he was offering me for the small sum of one hundred and twenty francs per month a revolutionary ironing board, rigorously tested by certified technicians.

I set up my work equipment in the kitchen, determined to profit from this promotional intrusion to feed my inspiration. How obscene to link ironing with revolution! The President would throw in *(conditional)* with my order, four floral print ceramic mugs, a romantic set that I will have *(future)* the pleasure of using. This change from conditional to future, without any justification, revealed a great deal about marketing ploys used to seduce the potential buyer – used to seduce me, Marie Nimier, valued client. It left no room for hesitation except a fragment of a sentence wedged between two commas, two silk-screen poppies.

I opened the brochure that accompanied the letter. Always on the cutting edge, the company in question was offering a new concept, reversing old ways of thinking. The most creative minds had been mobilised. Professionals had been brought together, scientists interviewed, homemakers surveyed at the entrances of shopping centres. The results were loud and clear: no longer was it enough to boast about the iron's glide, it was now essential to highlight the board's retention capacity. Man's hand-held tool was being abandoned in order to eroticize its support. There was now an interest in the underside, the least attractive side. Enough of tables as objects, tables simply inert, women relegated to household chores. Gone were unwanted creases and bed sheets that slipped onto the floor: my blouses would stay stuck onto the board, yes, Mme Nimier, in a word, stuck. They would end up softer, smoother and in consequence, a greater pleasure to wear.

After all, times had changed. Sexual liberation had been fruitful and even if today, when the future replaced the conditional, women were still stuck with the ironing, it was no longer a chore, but rather a glorious task. Beside the free offer, an action shot of me ironing highlighted my future satisfaction and the famous pedal that controlled the system's suction, emphasized by the gracefulness of my ankles. I looked at myself, or rather at the blond that was supposed to be me. Standing up, in first position, smooth hair, black skirt and a fitted blazer that showed my bust off perfectly. Smiling, radiant, flawless. Then me again, seated, the same serene expression, my left foot slightly in front, my thighs pressed together – but the apparatus was simple to open, read the brochure, press one lever and the entire thing could be easily folded and stored away in a minimum of space (behind a door, in a closet, any place where passing lovers might try to hide). It seemed everything had been thought of, not one detail overlooked. There was an

outlet at the end of the board to supply my heater, or any other gadget I might need to maintain my interior. By way of concluding remark and before the usual closing salutation, the President wanted to assure me that he was entirely at my disposal to personally prove both his appreciation for my business as well as the solidity of his equipment. I imagined him stretched out on the long heated board doing a demo. One of his technicians would press on the pedal, and the noise of the engine would rise up like the buzzing of a trapped insect, reminding me of the basement of my old high school with its furnace that I inevitably described in my novels, the setting for all sorts of debauchery and distractions. I had very long hair at the time, light brown and curly, I used to sit on it and spend most of my classes splitting the ends. We were thirty-three girls in the class, thirty-three girls and one boy. The school was moving slowly down the path of coeducation. We each had our own odd habits to help pass the long periods of inactivity, biting nails, doodling in the margins, chewing or splitting open pencils, depending, there was even one girl who caressed herself endlessly, and seemingly without pleasure. Her body was motionless, leaning toward the aisle, as if it was breathing in the teacher's words. This was what fascinated me, this opening in the middle of the class, like a black hole sucking up all the living energy of National Education. Sometimes Solange –let's say her name was Solange –would bring her index finger up to her mouth. Just at the edge of her lower lip she kept a pool of saliva so that she didn't have to push her finger in. I was ashamed to be looking at her but really I wasn't looking at her: I was seeing her. I was sitting sideways, leaning against the wall, splitting, yes, I was dividing. Fragments of hair were falling in spirals onto my lap. The girls had also separated themselves into two groups, those who had already slept with someone and those who hadn't. Our study

abroad programs were constantly messing up these groups. The one boy in the class, originally from Soisiel, had arrived a virgin. Our teachers (all women, who gave him special treatment, that is, as if he were an inferior creature) advised us to be open and friendly towards him. We had followed their advice without hesitation. Open and friendly we were, especially towards him. We took him down into the basement of the school, accessible through the farthest door of the washroom, a door without a knob, but one that a good screwdriver could easily force open. Our classmate would amiably let us fondle him. He cleared his throat often, no doubt a bit overwhelmed by the force of his sensations. He made me think of the President of Jolicoeur & Company, very polite, very willing, stretched out on the ironing board and its two-layered, special fibre fleece cover, the President who had thought of every detail: he was clean, close shaven, and his machine upright, I took him in my hand in a way no manual had ever taught me. I stroked him and I liked stroking him – it was important for him, this pleasure that he felt rising within me, my emotion, this delight that he could see in my face each time the tip of his tool touched the soft of my palm. The President's sweaty stomach, the furnace's glowing metal and all the while my thoughts wandering back and forth over the smooth, pink adolescent skin of this unforgettable young classmate, whose name I would nevertheless forget, his face even, so much was my attention focussed elsewhere, as, well, we fooled around, as a clear steam shot out of the holes in the iron, little jets, very precise, very thick, he tells me to squeeze a bit tighter. It's now the President speaking, "squeeze a bit harder", he repeats, and he's right, I'm elsewhere, thinking of other things, of Solange's dreamy look – I heard his voice, the voice of the President in person, no longer content just to send me letters, he addresses me in person, me the idiot who once ordered from

him a bunch of dust cloths for thirty francs, and maybe later a pair of hypoallergenic pillows, the faithful client whom he thinks he can seduce with a couple of romantic mugs – he asks for more, calling me now by my first name, don't stop he says now, I beg you, more, buy more. His powerful hands pull me towards him, looking for a way into me, the path to life, one finger inside, the others pressing into my buttocks, gripping them, surprised no doubt, having pushed my skirt up onto my hips, to find such a thin barrier, a lace nothing whose colour he can guess: black, obviously black – a blonde always wears her sexy lingerie while she irons, who knows who might (…), one day it's a fireman selling calendars door-to-door, she guesses right away the purpose of his visit: it's the month of April, a bit late for buying Christmas gifts to exchange for holiday embraces, she invites him to come in, as one does in polite society. He lays his things down on the sofa, the fire truck is waiting down below with the other firemen, one of his balls is bigger than the other and it's very exciting to watch it rising or at least to imagine it rising, while the President caresses me – I don't know if I can claim that he's sticking me or that he's "licking" me as the spell checker on my aging computer is suggesting, but that's just what he's trying now after tonguing me (just like I used to lick and stick my first political flyers on the walls of the school, with saliva, my brother wrote: "*Pompidou, des sous*" and we licked the backs); the fireman's hose was nicely shaped and hard but not too big and it penetrated me fully, deeply, without any pain. He knew all the classic tricks, clit and all, for the g-spot to aim for the navel. I came before him, a quick orgasm, completely physical, without fanfare. When the siren rang, calling for him, no doubt, he went on his way. I gave him a tissue and found myself alone once again with my ironing, stretched out on the carpet, a real damp cloth. The President of Jolicoeur & Co.,

suspecting that I was once again in another world, in my own thoughts, despite my palm that was working him rigorously, was polite enough to advise me: he was going to come. His semen spurted out, ten fingers grabbed my ass, I jumped up, everything unfolding faster than I could imagine: now it was my turn to stretch out on the board, my turn to get pressed.

"Don't worry," said the President, "this is one of our own servicemen, Frédéric Picaud."

How had he gotten in here? The serviceman whispered to just call him Freddy. He must have had some sort of special key for emergency purposes, for irons left plugged in after their owners' departure or for pressure cookers about to explode. He pulled out of his briefcase a machine for massaging tired shoulders and necks. The thing seemed quite long to me, but maybe this was just an illusion because it slipped inside perfectly. The President placed a stool on either side of the board so I could rest my feet. His associate bent over and began to brush my hair which had fallen like a curtain on either side of the ironing board. As he stroked my hair he cooed at me gently, and I thought that if only Aline could have seen this, she would have been amazed at how a man could take care of me. Delicately, yes despite the thing that was vibrating between my thighs, you are beautiful, let yourself go sweetheart, let yourself come; he must have been an expert in customer service since he knew exactly what to say and where to press. Now he was sliding the brush across my forehead, over my chest, its little plastic teeth leaving a trail of lines as they went. I wanted him to take my mouth, to suck my nipples, to force his tongue between my legs with big thrusts, but the key rattled in the front door, like a chorus. Caress me, I begged, I would have liked to come before Aline arrived, my friend,

I was almost there, on the edge of it, the President moved faster, I started to moan, Aline must have thought I was a lunatic, why was I lying on the new ironing board, the one we had just bought on credit despite our financial difficulties, the anti-calcium cartridge on the floor soaking in its tap water juice, and me spread-eagled on the board, stuffed full of some instrument plugged in where the iron should have been. I tried to speak in a normal voice as I introduced our visitors, I lifted myself up on one elbow, very woman-of-the-worldly, Aline, allow me to introduce you to the President of Jolicoeur & Company and his assistant Freddy Picaud; I started to laugh, to giggle rather, you know, the company that offered us the cups (the mugs, corrected the President, pushing the vibrator all the way in), a groan escaped me, I could feel it, if he continued like that, I was going to come a second time. Aline introduced herself as well, Aline Bertinazzi, I share the apartment with Marie. She was perfect, acting as if she hadn't noticed a thing, I'll make us some tea, she said, don't mind me, but the President didn't agree, he invited her to come join him while the water was heating up, Aline is a brunette, she has a strong scent like a cat that loves to be petted, her country air, her round cheeks, her generous bosom, her (...), yes, that's it, men love her overflowing figure enhanced by the clothes she buys off the junior racks. Aline doesn't know how to say no. Freddy whipped out his tool at a sign from the President, he had his toy in the air, a nice piece of flesh, it feels good once in a while to see a nice big cock, especially in the absence of a big beautiful life. He pushed my friend over to the table, the traditional one, where we eat and where we roll out pastry dough, then he pulled out of his pocket a little packet: a lubricated disposable condom. I hadn't seen that type before, that style, he promised to write the brand down for me on a piece of paper. A bit expensive, he added, but creamy, almost odourless, super easy to

use and in fact the tube slipped in super simply between Aline's thighs. She had a really cute pussy, I already said that didn't I, well-rounded, nicely moulded, with lips like petals just begging to be painted. Her clit sprung up as the creamy lubricant glided past. It reminded me of America, this shining, wet tongue pointing out of its sheath. The President moved closer to his employee, titillated by the show, he would have very much liked to get his stick in there. Freddy had the situation well in hand. The President worked on himself, leaning slightly forward as if to shake off the last drop, after taking a piss, but without much result. Then, Freddy slid his cock into Aline's cunt, true, it was done a bit as if giving a demonstration but who could blame him for taking a little revenge on his superior. Or perhaps it was an arrangement between the two of them, a sort of Japanese conspiracy. In any case, Aline, enjoying the game, had changed positions to best show herself off. She was crouching down now, her back arched, her magnificent ass lifted up, like at the proctologist, relax miss, relax, she was looking at me, both of them were looking towards me, only the President had his back turned to me, breathing heavily through his nose as he stroked his giraffe in solidarity. I have to admit it excited me to see him short of breath and to imagine the stubborn laziness of his middle finger, his elbow was also moving rapidly, but my observations were suddenly brought to an end by the first notes of the *Ode to Joy*: the President's telephone was ringing. His wife was worried ("My wife", he whispered, holding the telephone away from his mouth). Man, what a hard-on! He suddenly became completely stiff, all the way up to the expression on his face. Now there's a happy man, I thought, who goes hard at the very sound of his wife's voice. Then, I realised what was exciting him wasn't to hear her but rather to talk to her with his cock in the air and better still: to lie to her in front of witnesses. Yes, the lie

definitely impacted his hard-on as he spun a never-ending tale of a difficult meeting, a technical breakdown that had accidentally led to a kid getting burned, no not the iron, the table, the suction part, and the further he got into his story, the more turned on he got. When he could stand it no longer, he turned to give me his cock to suck, take it deep he said covering the receiver with his palm – at this point in the conversation just moving the phone away was no longer enough. As for Freddy Picaud, he was giving his dick a good workout, his was a sort of BBQ cock (*big but quick*),[4] Aline would comment later when we were once again alone, Aline who at the moment showed no sign of disappointment. She knew how to see the bright side of things, to remember the best part, his beautiful cock, its magnificent form, its drive. The water had already been boiling for a while, no, Freddy wouldn't have time for a cup of tea, with or without the mug, he still had work to do, but he promised he'd jump at the first opportunity to visit us again. The product was guaranteed for two years, exceptional follow-up service and the whole nine yards, I'll leave you my personal line, don't hesitate to call, even for the least little thing.

A two-year warranty, I thought, that's incredible. We could wash a lot of stuff in two years, iron a lot of blouses – as if we looked like the kind of chicks who wear blouses– let's say three a week which makes (...) if I've calculated correctly, and as many bodies pressed together, as many skirts pulled up, lips embraced and wallets cleaned out by Jolicoeur & Co. The President was still on the phone, my lips were starting to hurt; tomorrow I would surely have little sores and aching cheeks. As the President was now mentioning the upcoming family vacation, I decided to go take a bath. As soon as my mouth left his cock, the President quickly got rid of his wife and came in

[4] In English in the original text

hot pursuit, knocking over Aline's pile of magazines in his haste. I didn't have the time to adjust the temperature or to lock the door. He seemed furious that I had (…), was grabbing me by the wrists, pulling me to the floor, I lost my balance and fell down onto the "made in Taiwan" terrycloth bathmat, my head against the side of the tub, hot water pouring out of the tap, arms crossed, the President on top of me (…) dropping me like a dirty sock, you'll regret it. I'm going to give it to you until you beg for forgiveness, I'm going to fuck your brains out, fill you with come, I hated that man, what he was, everything he represented and yet my pelvis was rising up with his rhythm, I started to inhale him, to suck him inside, and he actually thought he was fucking me. Now he was strangling me, his arm over my throat, then refining his grip, his thumb and finger on either side of my windpipe, I could feel the skin connecting his thumb and index, this firm yet tender skin pressing like a blade on my neck, a string cutting through butter, he was getting excited and I repeated to myself, butter, like through butter, where was Aline, I was having difficulty swallowing and images were flashing before my eyes, I crushed him between my breasts like the obese woman on the street corner, the fat one with her little dog, I was squeezing the juice out of him, he was going to pay; four hundred bucks for the hand job and six for the full meal deal, he was going to cough it up, the President, he'd beg for more, come back everyday to wet his shirt, begging, with a haggard look in his eye, and I'd rent a nice apartment, with full cupboards and a huge desk where I'd write beautiful stories by hand, long romantic stories while drinking champagne or organic tea infusions. I heard a noise in the hallway. Aline was watching us from the mirror across the hall, ready to intervene. Her presence comforted me, she gave me the strength to (…). The President started to cry out with clenched teeth, a muffled cry,

you're going to pay for this, he told me again slapping me across the face, you're going to pay for this; my heart was beating, my stomach was shaking, the tub was about to overflow, my head was knocking against the tiles, I was clinging to him like to a life raft, I owed him my salvation, I was stealing my pleasure from him, it was the only way to get through this, the only way not to become his victim. Pushing me with his knee, he forced me to stand, I could feel something trying to penetrate me from behind, I recognised the sweet smell of soap, that soap in the form of an arc found in locker rooms, with a hole in the middle to hang it up, a bolt to hold it in place, I tensed my muscles, I tightened my fists, the President pressed harder, I'm going to have you, he was saying, you are going to give me your little ass, and the more I tightened up the more that I felt my pussy grasping his prick until I could hardly tell what was whose, I wanted to destroy him, to destroy myself in him, I could feel the pleasure mounting, pleasure and the pain of pleasure in the same deadly rattle, the President crumpled onto my stomach, his body trembling, he was coming in a way no woman had ever made him come, he came without wanting to, against his will, he was weeping now and calling me politely by my full name again. But what was he saying, what could he find to say after all these words? A bit of silence, I sighed, a bit of silence, and suddenly I found myself in the kitchen, my computer asleep and my notes spread everywhere across the table. Someone was looking at me. My back and neck were hurting, especially my neck. Aline was standing behind me, she had just woken up.

"You still haven't finished your story?" she asked as she rubbed her eyes.

"I don't know. We'll see. I don't have the courage to reread it, I'm going to give it to the editor as is."

She moved about slowly, still half-asleep. A certain softness in her lower lip like a pout, a certain nonchalance made it seem as though she felt like making love. She slept in an old T-shirt of my brother's. I felt empty and dirty. When she reached up on the tips of her toes to get the coffee mugs, I saw the outline of her dark tuft through the thin t-shirt. She had pulled the bottom of the fabric down between her thighs, and it was painful, this fabric on the verge of slipping free – I needed so much to be comforted. After a few moments, the aroma of coffee would fill the air.

Gabriel Tournon insisted. He wanted to understand how I had arrived at this story about ironing, by what path, what twists of the mind. I kept silent as a mouse, a bit cornered, a bit dumb, paralysed at the thought of squeaking out words I would surely regret later. Shortly before his death, my father had sent me a letter. What says the Queen of Silence? he carefully wrote, and since then, never having known how to resolve the inherent contradiction of this double command, I fell apart every time I had to reply to questions from men. I felt as though on top of a hill on a bicycle without brakes. It was tiring for everyone, but that's how it was. That was me.

The editor was getting impatient. He had well-groomed fingernails and long wrists, much longer than the average wrist, as if he had an additional joint, which gave his gestures a disarming fluidity. I ought to trust him, he was saying as he brushed the table with the tips of his fingers, if he had requested that I write this first story, it wasn't with the expectation of receiving a finished piece, ready to be published, but rather with the goal of defining together an approach, a topic. He didn't see how he could get involved financially with an author who…

Now we were getting to the point. I was obliged to talk. The publishing company for which Gabriel Tournon worked was going to give me money, quite a bit of money, more than I had ever received for signing a contract with my usual editor, not only so that I would write and publish with them but so that I would respond to questions from their literary director. And also that I would agree to follow his instructions. This was a commission, that was what I had to get into my head: I had no money for my next month's rent, the water bill was due, not to mention the debts that were accumulating, they were offering me work, I had no choice, no way to refuse. I spit out a couple of

sentences about what the editor was calling my approach. Notes, yes, lots of notes. Links, associated ideas. I was on a roll, speeding downhill, discovering my ideas as I was saying them. I mentioned groups of words that came to me, then groups of objects, similarities between shapes that I wanted to put into play – the little holes in the iron that steam poured out of and those in the telephone receiver that voices came out of, and in particular the voice of the President's wife…

I was going to mention that other hole which very much preoccupied my text, those other spurts, but I didn't dare, I didn't know what terms to use to describe them, suddenly I was at a loss for words. I had spoken very quickly, too quickly no doubt, to get it over with. A high-pitched voice interrupted my hesitations. We were asked what we would like to drink. I ordered a coffee, the editor, a neat whisky. The server snapped his rag before tucking it under his belt. He was annoyed at us for sitting on the second level, when there were plenty of seats on the main floor. Gabriel was accepting this hostility with an ease that fascinated me. He wasn't at all bothered by the way the waiter dragged his feet, his arrogant look, the whipping of his rag like a maid catching a fly, or swatting it against our table. I was very uncomfortable, I would have preferred that we stayed down below, but the editor had his reasons: he didn't want to be seen in my company. We were here incognito, I had been forewarned, our project would suffer no indiscretion.

Gabriel Tournon was leaning back on his chair sucking the end of his pen. Soon he would tap it on the edge of the ashtray. I couldn't get used to these superfluous gestures that he seemed to set up between us as if he was looking, always, to blur his own image. I couldn't make out his face. His bright red hair overshadowed the rest of his features. The server gone, I closed the episode about the holes to return to the theme of

ironing, here I felt on comfortable ground, this fabric that stretches out under the iron, a skin, this fabric that's unable to move, held, stuck to the suction board, the whole thing inspired by this personalised letter…Hoping to conclude, I offered to show him the brochure in question. His face clouded over. You mean to say that Jolicoeur exists for real? he asked with a worried glance at my manuscript.

This *for real* made me smile, as if in a novel it was possible to lie. The editor had the wonderment of a child, that's what I liked about him, this mix of maturity and innocence that he actually embodied, his language, his expressions. I nodded. Gabriel Tournon cleared his throat. He had something very important to tell me. It was necessary to be clear, his publishing house could not afford a lawsuit. I had been asked to take inspiration from the daily lives of women, and he was still holding to this idea, but to then use a real advertising campaign…

I tried to justify myself. I wasn't completely stupid, I had changed the name of the mail order company, and even if the board really did exist, with its suction engine and its hundred percent diagonal fibre cover, the wording of the letter had been modified. The editor didn't seem convinced. He asked me, with reluctance, why I had chosen "*Jolicoeur.*" I explained to him how my spellchecker, not knowing this grouping of letters, was suggesting to replace it with "*jouissance.*" The shift in meaning had intrigued me. Gabriel Tournon emptied his glass, he was speaking more slowly, his hair seemed to have lost some of its lustre. Maybe it was the day already growing dark. He found my approach a bit too "experimental." I didn't see anything experimental in it – what I could see quite clearly was my contract slipping away. I tried to backtrack, I wasn't that attached to this title in particular, we could certainly choose another, but the editor

interrupted me. Jolicoeur was fine with him, putting aside the legal difficulty. Even if no one grasped the dual sense of the term, its electronic perversion, the word was interestingly suggestive, of the floral print cups, those romantic mugs that the President brandished like the ultimate arm of persuasion. No, the problem was much deeper. He had the impression that I hadn't reflected enough on the project, on all aspects of the project.

A young girl in a beige suit poked her head into the room. I wondered if she was looking for the editor. She waited a few seconds in silence close to the sideboard in a very fake pose, then turned her back on us and left.

Gabriel was scratching at a crusty spot on the table. He admitted to me that I wasn't the first person to whom he was proposing a contract, but that none of the other women contacted had taken up the challenge. They had found the idea interesting, yes, they needed to think about it, and then in the end, they had all brushed him off. The editor claimed that as soon as he'd read my novels, he'd known that with me it would be different. Overall, there was potential in my characters...how best to describe it...it seemed to him that there were other words moving around behind the primary text, cruder words, surely I knew what he was alluding to...

"And so I thought," concluded Gabriel as if this were a kind of revelation, "I thought that these other words, for once, could be brought to the surface."

I was short on cigarettes. The editor offered me his pack.

"But I prefer to tell you frankly, what you've given me here, this just won't do."

He flipped awkwardly through the manuscript. Entire paragraphs were crossed out in black pen. The beginning, in particular, he sighed, this feminist tirade against Jolicoeur & Co., enough to turn off an entire regiment…

I agreed, it was perhaps a bit too long, I admitted, a bit off topic. Gabriel seemed satisfied with this reaction. I had nothing left to lose, I just had to hold back from crying. From gushing with tears like a cucumber sprinkled with salt. I shouldn't think about the money, but about very abstract things, streams of colour, geometric shapes, while regularly nodding my head. The whole thing was unstable, explained the editor, one got lost in it, it jumped from the fireman to the President, from the kitchen to the school basement…And then, even if I arranged all that, organised it, I should also think about the impact of the images I was developing. Men today were confused, they needed to be reassured, and not thrown off by these furtive associations. Taboos, infantile frustrations, repressed desires, thwarted advances, continued Gabriel raising his voice, these are the essential ingredients of classic pornography!

Classic pornography, I thought, here we go again with the revolutionary ironing board. Gabriel knew his stuff. In the publishing world, he was considered the expert in erotic things. He had published several works on the topic. He acted like a general contractor. Was I aware of creating situations that were distressing for men, or was this an expression of my subconscious? This was why he was asking me about my writing process. Had I written this story all in one shot, or was it part of a premeditated plan?

I nodded my head again by way of reply. I must have looked like one of those dogs sitting on the back window ledge of a car. Like those cows with bobbing necks. Writing pornography is subtler than it seems, continued Gabriel. You'll note that I'm

talking about the practice of writing, not about an artistic phenomenon, and nevertheless…Nevertheless, it's all from the domain of fantasy, from the imagination. Smeared red lipstick, silicone breasts, vulgar décor, limbs contorted for better display, better viewing…Nothing is natural in a porno production, everything is reinvented, coded, larger-than-life. That said, there is one problem: these codes change less quickly than mindsets. That's why I'm counting on you, a novelist: I want to create a new trend, something that will be to pornography like new cuisine is to old. Less heavy. Less saucy. More inventive…

In economic terms, nothing was clearly spelled out, but I guessed, hidden behind these words, the principal motivation for the project. There was a market to tap into, money to be made. Women's magazines that filled their columns with articles about sex had figured this out ages ago, as had the new men's magazines that caricatured them with distressing flippancy. Even if the quality of these articles often left something to be desired, that's what readers hungered for, female readers, the desire to stimulate their imagination, the need to escape, to answer some of their nagging questions. All that was missing was the right product. Gabriel scribbled something in his agenda. He reread what he had just written. He seemed very pleased with himself.

"I've found the title," he said radiantly, "Thanks to you, just like that, while talking to you, I've found the title to your next book!"

He looked me in the eyes for the first time since the beginning of our meeting.

"I wonder why I didn't think of it sooner…Short texts, sensual, a hint of discovery…"

Gabriel was laughing as he rubbed his hands together, he was delighted, taken by his invention. He tore the page out of his book and handed it to me.

"Imagine the cover, a matt coloured background, pink perhaps, a fleshy pink, and the impact of these words?"

The editor had written: "The New Pornography."

The cover, I could see, but what I had a hard time imagining was my first and last name coupled with those twenty-two letters.

And my mother's face.

To make new from old, cash from come, with crumpled dresses, some neatly trimmed cunt, and the whole thing backed up by its female perspective: men were going to feast for a few hundred francs, and me, I was going to fill the fridge. To start, we should define a promising scenario, Gabriel Tournon was suggesting, and stick to it, develop it, like any other text that you'd write in any other collection. A promising scenario? The fireman, for example, now that's what I call a promising character. He's on his tall ladder, with flames all around, and like in a dream, through a thick cloud of smoke, he discovers you. You're at your window, in the middle of the fire, you've just jumped out of the shower, naked, terrified, dripping wet…Why are you looking at me like that? Did I say something wrong?

No, nothing wrong, I was just asking myself why he had chosen the most unoriginal part of my text, this meeting between a fireman and a girl on the make, I couldn't see what was new in that. I was pretty proud of myself for daring to ask the question. The editor was unruffled. The novelty is you, he affirmed. Your clarity of vision.

I left the café with a cheque in my pocket and the impression of having lost. Gabriel Tournon was hanging on to my manuscript, he was going to think more about how we could rework this ironing story. We'd probably have to abandon the President's part and concentrate more on Freddy Picaud, the assistant, a figure less easily identified in real life. A certified technician, that's precise yet at the same time vague enough, it doesn't sound like anyone in particular, whereas the President, Mr President…

Gabriel talked on and on, he was thrilled with the results of our conversation. We had come a long way. It was suppertime, I said good-bye. I called Aline from a telephone booth. I wasn't feeling very well, I was having a hard time breathing, needed to be comforted. She said she'd meet me at Bartens, to celebrate the signing of the first advance, then we'd go dancing. We chose a nice Bordeaux, two appetizers and two dishes off the menu, thus marking the return of a period of prosperity in our lives. I emptied my glass without enjoyment, this dinner was too late. I was nauseated, and yet I ate as if I hadn't swallowed a thing for two days. I needed to smother something within me, and the more I stuffed myself, the queasier I felt. I was supposed to hand in the fireman story next month – hand in, yes, that was the appropriate word. Aline could tell that I wasn't doing too well, she tried to reassure me. You write him up a story about a nice big cock and then you scoop the cash, she was saying with her typically optimistic outlook. Then afterwards, thanks to that money, you write what you want to write.

Aline had appeared in my life the year before, without much education and without any particular ambition, recommended by one of her cousins who I hardly knew at all. She came from Santa Fe where she had spent part of her adolescence. She knew how to build a tee-pee and could recognize hallucinogenic mushrooms. We hit it off right from the start. I had offered her a place to stay, and little by little she had settled in permanently. Her mother was French by birth and her father came from the south of Italy, I can't quite remember anymore how the family ended up in New Mexico, for a job probably, a career move, and Aline had followed. She was perfectly tri-lingual, that is, she spoke all three languages badly, even if fluently. Aline had learned to be supple, she moved from one world to another with no apparent difficulties, and it was this same

ability that made her life difficult: she was incapable of choosing, she could only slide. From one language to another, from one guy to another, from one little job to another little job.

"You finished the bottle, you'll get married within the year!"

Aline had no idea how to cheer me up. Me get married, a good joke, and to whom? Her tactlessness didn't even make me smile. I was mad at myself for taking out my discomfort on her. I had told her in detail about Gabriel Tournon's project. She found the title fabulous. *The New Pornography*, that evoked for her the New Eve, a nightclub on Fontaine Street. She got excited by the idea that you could earn a living describing hanky-panky. Her cheerfulness was overwhelming. I tried to explain to her that I had made a mistake, that I felt as little apt to write porno stories as I did to write a romance novel, it wasn't a moral question nor a lack of willingness but a question of ability. Aline didn't believe me. You just have to stick to it, she said, all you have to do is pull from your own experiences, just to get on track and then you improvise. What about that Japanese guy that you met in the airplane, and then the other one after that, with the pen you-know-where, that's a great story, don't you think?

"I've already written a novel that opens with an airplane scene, I'm not going to start that again…"

"It's never a matter of restarting but of developing it more fully!"

Aline wouldn't give up once she sank her teeth into an argument, there was something that could be done with those two Japanese guys, if it wasn't in the airplane, then it would be on a train or in a hot-air balloon, and the more she insisted the more the editor's proposition seemed unacceptable to me. Aline should have given up, but no, she

stubbornly persisted. What are you afraid of, she continued, that you'll sully your brain cells?

As I remained silent, she unleashed her shock tactics.

"If this is going to work you into such a state, get a job as a cashier at *Prisu*, and we won't talk about it further. In one month, you'll earn hardly as much as you get from popping out a little story about nothing at all. And you'll be so wiped out at night that you won't ask yourself why: you'll just fall asleep in front of the TV, it cuts down on Lexomil.

Unflinching, I mopped up the sauce on my plate with a piece of bread. Aline knew what she was talking about. She took me by the chin and pulled my face toward her. I smiled at the sight of her weasel face. Aline, my sister, my friend. And then it would do you some good, she murmured, to get your feet a bit wet, to loosen up.

I felt myself go pale. Aline had read my books, she had seen me work, how did she dare insinuate that I wrote half-heartedly, like a tourist?

"I never said 'tourist'," she protested, "I just think that…"

Aline repeated, to get a little wet, to fill an order, write something a bit different than your usual unusual, for another audience, with another editor, I don't see what's offensive in saying that. It's good sometimes to shake up routines, it's strengthening.

Instead of shaking up my routine, I shook up the table as I got to my feet. A glass fell over, Aline jumped out of the way, knocking a waiter's arm in the process. I heard exclamations, laughs, even some applause (but it wasn't because of me as at first I thought: someone was being served a birthday cake), then I heard nothing more. The door swung around me, delivering me from the miasma of this gloomy conversation. I stood for a moment in front of the restaurant, motionless, as if waiting for someone. The oyster shucker was cracking open shells effortlessly, he had a wicked knack for it. A girl with a grey face offered me *Le Réverbère*. I didn't have any money on me, having forgotten my purse inside, and she said, loudly enough for everyone to hear: we stuff our faces at Bartens and we don't have ten bucks to help out. The oyster shucker threw me a glance out of the corner of his eye. He placed one last oyster on his seafood tray. I felt myself leave, sucked into the shell. In a fearful movement, I shut the lid, escaping from human view in general and from the girl's in particular. She moved away still complaining. I rested against one of the cement cylinders that stop cars from parking on the sidewalk. I remember wondering what the exact word is for these things that clutter up the walks, cement blocks or cement cocks? Mugs without handles. Dumb posts that leave bruises, dent car doors and block strollers from passing. And wheel chairs. When was the last time you saw someone handicapped? For the past few days, round posters blooming on the walls of the subway were asking this question. It was no longer necessary to lick them, the method had changed since my childhood, the slogans were printed on self-adhesive paper. Gabriel's soft voice echoed in my mind. How could he have claimed that beneath all of my novels flowed a licentious subtext? As if by scratching each word-covered page, one could find a dirty picture. Why had I not defended myself? Nothing

irritated me more than this idea of a clean, smooth and proper writing buoyed up by obscenity, like a purée of red fruits hidden under a layer of thick cream. How sick of him! I should have protested, but no, I had let it slide. I had even been flattered by this analysis, oh yes, you've really figured out how I work, by successive layers like the paint in the stairwell. I was disgusted with myself for having accepted his observations as the truth. In fact, I was a second-rate novelist, Gabriel had guessed it, and that was the only reason why he had shared his plan with me. Never would he have dared to contact an author worthy of that title. Impossible to say to someone you admire: look, I've a project for you, I'd like you to write me some pornographic short stories. This type of literature, he had repeated it often enough, was a great match for a certain mediocrity. They fed off each other, wallowing in their clichés. How could I have accepted such a proposition? All I had to do was to rip up the cheque and disappear from circulation. So many books are released each year, this would free up space on bookstore shelves, space for others, the good ones, those who were really committed. If Aline had said it, it was surely true. Why would she lie to me? Even to her, my friend, my best friend, I was a frivolous writer, frigid. The proof: I didn't write about my life, nor that of my cousin, who is actually a famous soccer player. I wasn't a discreet author, *not even* a discreet author, it should be said, interested in the little things in life, but a cowardly author, lurking behind figures of style, hidden away behind vague décors – ghostly capital cities, drifting suburbs, landscapes patched together like floating tarps anchored to the four corners of the imagination by a few irrefutable details: the name of a café, the taste of a national dish, the bicycle of a zookeeper, a baby's skeleton. I was nothing more than a dream weaver, and if my novels were still published, no doubt it was just out of habit. My universe had

no sociological value, it represented nothing other than itself, that is, nothing at all. Yes, I wrote for nothing at all, I wasn't even earning the equivalent of the minimum wage, so what was the use in continuing, what good would it do, book after book, creating wind? I should stop. Have the courage to leave. I would call in a second hand bookstore, yes, I was going to sell all of my books before emptying a few tubes of sleeping pills – this time I wouldn't screw up, I knew deadly mixes, drinks that would do the trick, I had had time to study the question.

Someone was calling me, the oyster shucker, his knife in the air, Aline didn't have enough to settle the bill. I returned to the restaurant and pulled a blank cheque out of my pocket under the puzzled gaze of the owner. It took me two attempts to properly write out the total in letters. My pen was out of control. Aline handed me my jacket. We walked around the Place de la Bastille in silence, side by side, without touching. Sell my books, the books that had carried me, that had kept me alive, night after night, that's what seemed the most painful to me in this whole story. The light turned green, then yellow, then on red we were crossing. People walking about found that normal, to turn colour into action. A couple was making out in front of the crêpe seller's shop. Rue de Charenton, Aline apologised. She wasn't really sure what she needed to be sorry for, but her arms wrapped around me. I let my head rest on her shoulder.

"This porno story," she said as she stroked my hair, "we'll write it together, would you like that? I have a friend who's a second hand dealer, he knows a ton about it, some business about firemen. We'll go talk to him…"

I felt her little hand in mine, this little hand that was pulling me back to life. The idea of working on this project with her calmed me at once, like the flushing of a toilet. It

was over, the sadness had passed, my bookshelf would stay put, the sleeping pills too, on the top shelf. I was going to write with Aline, my weasel sister.[5] We would both sign – yes, I insisted, I wanted her to sign too, even if we had to choose a pseudonym. Everyone would think we were lesbians, we'd go out with bare midriffs, or in contrast dressed very severely, high collars for interviews, grey and pearly, in square-heeled boots. Aline took me into the main room of the China Club, it was her turn to buy me a drink. I stumbled up the steps, the alcohol was taking its effect on my body, reviving me. All the tables were full, we took a seat at the bar. A young man in light pants came and sat down next to me.

"I've seen him before," I whispered in my friend's ear, "but I don't think we ever fucked."

Aline stifled a laugh.

"You're making progress," she murmured, "this Gabriel Tournon is having a very good influence on you."

I really would have liked to be that way, some days, a sort of vulgar chick who sleeps around, to spice up her life a bit. Just for the fun of it, Aline would have said. But no, that wasn't me either. I always had to invent some sort of love story. Even in the most indecent situations, I always found some romantic alibi.

"Do you really like him?" my friend insisted. "I think he's not bad. Did you see his thighs?"

Aline and men's legs! She was obsessed with everything below the waist, she looked at it all, the curve of the calves, the shape of the knee, the ankles, and the

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[5] "The Weasel Sisters who marry Star Husbands" is a Mi'kmaq story about an older sister with special powers and her imprudent younger sister.

Achilles' tendon, the network of veins, the strength of the buttocks and the way that the leg joined the lower abdomen, in front, that extremely sensitive part that isn't quite the torso, and not quite the thigh. A man's groin, do you realise, Marie, and to think that even the most sexist of men have that little fold there, that wonderful tenderness…

"So, do you like him?"

My neighbour turned towards me. Our gazes crossed without my feeling any excitement. Obviously, he was waiting for a sign from me before striking up a conversation. Aline admired my ability to resist primal temptations (by primal she meant rubbing against a nice hard cock during a rumba or accepting a stranger's direct invitation to follow him into a quiet corner as long as the guy was appetizing, and that he wore, it could never be repeated enough, a condom). Aline cultivated this type of encounter, essential to the proper functioning of her emotional intelligence, as she called this part of herself that governed her moods. She needed plain sex, without the sentimental attachments. I wondered if the fact that she was trilingual gave her greater liberty, or a greater appetite. One guy per tongue. Or one tongue, one guy. Sometimes she left the apartment at five o'clock in the afternoon, announcing to me that she was going to get a breath of fresh air. It was a bit like her stage curtain, this breath of fresh air, and also mysterious. How did she find her partners? My Aline would return several hours later a bit spaced out. She would disappear into the shower and soap herself for a long time.

"Are you regulars of the China Club?"

The young man voiced his first verbal attempt at seduction, followed by several others equally charming. His name was Helmut, he worked in the area. Yes, we had seen each other before, he had noticed us both, Aline with her bleached bangs that fell over her

eyes, and me, I was wearing a short, baggy dress with thin straps. Yes, we lived near the Aigre market. Yes, for a long time, born at the Saint-Antoine hospital, imagine that. Yes, a pleasant neighbourhood overall and, continued Helmut as he wrinkled his eyebrows, what do you do in life?

Aline gave me a probing look.

"My girlfriend and I, we write porn novels."

Helmut pretended to find this quite funny (ah! the sound of his little laugh, we should have recorded it, Aline would say, to play it again on days when we felt depressed). The Margarita was starting to take effect. The lights had changed. Moving shadows drifted across our foreheads. Aline stepped it up a notch.

"Are you into that kind of thing, porn?"

"So-so," replied Helmut. "But a friend of mine's a fanatic. He's got a whole collection at his place, maybe someday if it turns you on …"

Helmut handed us his business card. Director of Communication at the Tonic-Club, read Aline, then she whistled as she waved the card in the air, as if to shake water off of it. Helmut had a satisfied look on his face. He had to go home to bed because he was getting up really early the next day, new computer equipment being installed, but really pleased to have met us. Not at all boring, our job, um, um, it was the first time he had ever met…in flesh and blood…

"Writers?"

Helmut laughed again and, to show his open-mindedness, gave us each a kiss, saying, here, I'll give you a kiss. Kissing for him wasn't a natural movement of the lips, which was obvious from the way that they moved forward, reaching towards our cheeks,

so as not to slide. "Too bad he's such a bore," Aline commented, watching him as he left, "you could have made really cute babies together. For once you meet a guy with a real job…"

"Yeah," I agreed, "cute babies."

Aline knew me so well. She knew that my deepest fantasy wasn't to jump a fireman, with or without his helmet, but, like all little girls raised on fairy tales, to get married, to be happy, and as a result, to have lots of babies. Aline was pressuring me to benefit from my freedom, it's not when you've got little brats hanging off your legs that you're going to dance the night away. It'll be a different kind of party, I protested, but Aline, who was eight years younger than me, couldn't figure out what I was talking about.

We walked home through side streets. I really needed that big hug; have a good sleep, said Aline, tomorrow we get to work. As I did every night before turning out the lights, I looked at my bookshelf. It was an old habit from when I had fallen seriously ill, I must have been about eight or nine. One morning, I couldn't manage to get out of bed. I hurt all over, my knees, my ankles, I couldn't even put my feet on the ground. The doctor who had been called in on emergency claimed that I was playing it up to get out of going to school. He forced me to sit up, I fainted from the overwhelming pain. He changed his mind. I was examined by important specialists surrounded by their students who all seemed very old to me. I was bedridden. One month, two months, after the third, I realised I was never going to pull through. I was going to die, it was obvious from the looks on the faces of my visitors, very cheerful people, very encouraging, I didn't have long to suffer, soon it would all be over. My classmates wrote to me, and the teacher, all

wished that I would "get well soon", my cousin sent me some sand in the mail and my great aunt gave me penicillin shots each morning, penicillin shots every night, she soon ran out of places to poke me. Every Thursday, a man in a white coat came to take my blood. He filled up a whole row of sticker-marked tubes that he shook before placing into a black leather case. Once a month the same man – or was it a different one? – checked my heart. I remember his cold hands as he positioned the electrodes. I ate neither sugar nor salt because of the huge doses of cortisone that I was given, yet I was getting bigger with alarming regularity. I was swelling up, I was unrecognisable, surely because of all those books that I was devouring with my eyes. I was so hungry. My mother consoled me as best she could. My brother tortured me as usual, he would come have his afternoon snack by my bedside. Once he had left, I secretly gathered up the crumbs. My bed had been moved into the living room. I would fall asleep contemplating my father's bookshelf. His whole collection was there, organized by him, autographed by his friends, the books had not yet been moved by the person who had inherited them. If I died during my sleep, this was the image of the living world that I would bring to him. And it wasn't sad, an end like that.

I dreamt of a faceless man who was gently caressing my throat. He was standing in the middle of an empty space and I, sitting beside him on a stool. An immense sex organ sprung horizontally from his body, held in place by forks planted in the soil. A dark-skinned woman was explaining to the crowd the irrigation problems tied to this intrepid phenomenon. She spoke quickly while waving her arms in profile, like an Egyptian.

The voice swelled, overshadowing the man, overshadowing the forks. It was going to rain in the northeast of France. I threw back the covers and automatically hit the clock radio button. I had kept my habit of getting up early even though no one was waiting for me. I kept in mind that I might one day go back to a job, with a salary and responsibilities, unlike writing which according to the commonly accepted view, isn't a job but a hobby, or at best a state of being, a fragile impulse resulting from both illumination and fear, something like the Holy Spirit sliding down a glass straw inside the shaft of your pen. I thought once again of Gabriel, I wondered why he didn't just bring his project to fruition by writing his porno stories himself, he seemed to know so much about it. All he'd have to do is sit himself down in front of a keyboard, with his hard-on for a barometer. His hands would have stroked and stroked the perfect story. Gabriel's hands, long and bony, with little red hairs on his fingers, and polished nails, ovals, perfectly trimmed. Did he file them with a rose-coloured nail file? I heard Aline moving about behind her stage curtain, maybe she was giving herself a little workout to get in shape. The mattress was squeaking. We had salvaged it when the neighbours had moved, the fabric was almost brand new, the springs were even, you couldn't have everything: privacy and comfort, both for free. I quietly got dressed hoping that my friend would fall back asleep. I didn't have the courage to attack the firemen after just jumping out of bed,

I needed to digest my dream. Who was this cock-like man, this pharaoh-like woman, and most of all why this word, intrepid, that I had never used in any of my novels? It gave me the feeling of stepping out of a world imagined by someone else. A painting, perhaps, which would explain the male character's smeared features, his face erased by the wipe of a turpentine soaked cloth. I imagined the artist's quick gesture, this urgent need to spread the paint, to move it. The focus was elsewhere, towards the place where the penis was planted, its base, its place of attachment – hard to be sure about this, but it seemed to me rather too high to be in the usual spot. If the man had been seated at a table, he could have wrapped this thing around his plate. Or crossed it between his arms, thrown it nonchalantly over his shoulder like a scarf, in fact a multitude of elegant postures would have been at his disposal. There was in this clay-model cock a plant-like gracefulness that effaced any indecency in its appearance. The foreskin, also a bit loose, drooped away from the round gland, no doubt too relaxed to ever completely embrace its full curvature. Maybe it wasn't a penis after all, but an umbilical cord cut further up, far from the child, close to the mother's belly. The bandage-wrapped prick would have scarred, the cord would have grown larger, it would have continued developing until adulthood, creating this pacific monster, half-sex, half-horn, remnant of a time when man and woman lived in symbiosis. No matter what its source, this embodied softness, intrepid really in its obstinate self-exposure, was going against my editor's most fundamental recommendations. Gabriel Tournon wanted it hard, clearly erect, I dreamt about flaccid. Long flaccidity, knotted flaccidity, but in the end still flaccid. And I was enjoying it, that's what intrigued me, this hot feeling that stayed with me through the early morning, in the bathroom, on the stool in the kitchen as I drank my coffee, and even in front of my

banker to whom I explained that the cheque from my new editor being only the first in a long series, he could, without risk, issue me a new credit card. The banker looked at his screen without much conviction. He pronounced the word *discovery*, and others as well that I ignored. He had pointed ears that made his head look like a soup bowl. I felt like taking him by the handles and kissing him, this idiot who doubted my word, just as I felt like kissing all the guys I passed in the street, the handsome, the odd, the hurried, just to see the looks on their faces. Was I really awake? The image of this enormous member, sumptuously stretched out on its wooden pickets, gave me a bizarre courageousness. I climbed the stairs with my bag of croissants, ready to describe all the firemen in the world. Never, since my encounter with the Japanese man on the airplane, the one that Aline had mentioned, had I felt so transported by a transient being. I wondered if the Japanese in question ever thought about me. Did he dream that a tall white woman took him in her arms? Did he remember my scent, the colour of my eyes or only the sound of my voice? Nothing sloppy, however, in that being. Light, yes, childlike, graceful but nothing nonchalant. We were both going to the United States. An empty seat separated us. I had planned to work during the flight, I would be participating in a series of lectures on the place of the novel in contemporary literature and hadn't yet finished the translation of my talk. There were three of us, three European writers on the same flight, the other two from England – they had been invited at the last minute, I didn't even know their names. I arrived an hour late at Heathrow airport. Two passengers were strutting around in front of the check-in counter. The one on the right came towards me, her name was Loretta Flink, a golden key dangled between her breasts. Her matt complexion and very black eyes were the most attractive features of a seduction she reserved entirely for men.

Her pants were brand new, you could tell from the way that they hung, indifferent to the hips holding them up, as if they were still on display in a window, on the cold legs of a mannequin. I was wearing a linen skirt from *Bon Marché*. I liked to travel in white, it made me feel as though I were rich. I hadn't expected to find two female novelists at the meeting, men most often being the majority at this sort of event. The times were changing, just as the President of Jolicoeur & Co. pointed out, interests were taking a new turn, allowing here and there for novel voices to be heard. I shared this observation with Loretta Flink who looked at me like I was from another planet. The key jumped, her lips started to move. *Of course*, we were women, moreover, we had been chosen precisely for that reason, in order to meet the American faculty's quota. I wondered how she could discount the value of her own work to that point. The other participant, a certain Edwige, swimming in shiny jeans held up on her hips by a huge belt, supported her compatriot's assertion: we were the spokeswomen for a whole generation of women, it was for them that we were here, for them that we were writing. I brought to their attention that the three men invited by the same institution had been invited just as writers, plain and simple, without having to represent the entire male gender.

"Unless they're homosexuals," corrected Loretta.

"Yeah, if they're gay, they'll speak for the gays," confirmed Edwige.

I realised that we were going to run into some difficulties communicating, and it wouldn't be just a question of language. I attempted one last comment on the danger of these inflexible categories, these new ghettos in which we must not let ourselves be enclosed. I preached a large, borderless type of writing, not daring to use the word "universal" which seemed to me a bit pretentious, and since the two novelists listened to

me without reacting, I heard myself pronounce this sentence that I immediately regretted: If I write, isn't it to understand that which is not me?

Edwige put on a compassionate smile. I had the painful sensation of dropping down another notch in her esteem. She no longer took me for an alien, but for a moron, and the most painful thing about it was, she was probably right. With arguments like that, grumbled Loretta pulling out a pack of sugarless gum, nothing will ever change. Edwige was going to elaborate but happily she got cut off: a voice was calling the last passengers. The hostess had a frog in her throat and her message ended in a fit of coughing. She must have thought that her microphone was off because we heard her quite clearly insulting the passengers who were arriving late. My suitcase was checked. Edwige and Loretta studied their boarding cards, and then mine.

"Too bad," exclaimed the former in a delighted voice, "we're not with you!"

About ten rows separated us. The Japanese man was already settled when I arrived at my seat. He bowed his head several times in welcome and moved his travel bag, please, it's not in my way at all, the man had a kind face, he didn't speak French, I translated into English, so he returned his bag to the floor in front of the empty seat. I told him that I was from Paris, transatlantic flights being cheaper from London, but we had been delayed by the fog. I don't know why I was telling him my whole life story. The Japanese man was so tiny he was floating in his seatbelt. The stewardess bent over me to fix it for him, we were about to take off, there was no time to waste, she lifted her leg slightly to reach the metal buckle. I smelled her perfume or rather the scent of her deodorant, a mix of talcum powder and eau de cologne. Someone was calling me, I saw two ringed hands waving like marionettes above the seats: Edwidge and Loretta were

wishing me bon voyage. They had copies of their latest novels passed back to me, with warm dedications. This gesture reassured me. I was a bit clueless, true, but not a totally lost cause.

Maybe I was just making it all up.

There were drinks, we were served a meal, the plane went through some turbulence: I still hadn't done any work. The Japanese man had observed with curiosity as I ate, admiring the way that I cut the meat into such small morsels without making any mess. He himself was a vegetarian, he had ordered a special meal which he picked at sceptically. His smooth forehead wrinkled up as he chewed. He drank a beer to start off, very quickly, then another when the wagon passed again down the aisle. He was leaving the country of his birth for the very first time. No, he had never been to France, another time perhaps, now that we knew each other. It was at that precise moment, when he expressed the wish to meet up with me again in Paris one day, that my heart started to beat in that very particular rhythm, slightly sharp, that transformed my body into a love machine. This rapid, emotion-induced heartbeat gave rise to a series of secondary effects that I tried to master without much success. The palms of my hands began to sweat, I was suddenly very hot, I had to take off my jacket, then the dip in my skin, just below my nose, beaded up with sweat, my words fell into English with unusual ease, the words bouncing off laughs, and the Japanese man received this unwinding with evident satisfaction. To accompany the flavourless tea that the stewardess had just served him, he pulled out of his bag a block of brown paste vacuum packed in clear plastic. The plastic hugging this gelatinous form was very thick, he couldn't cut it with the standard knife from the meal tray. I pulled out the pocketknife that I had won at the fair in Trône and

had snuck onto the plane in my make-up case, yes, I know, no aerosol, no sharp objects. The Japanese man slashed an opening in the package. The paste oozed out between the translucent lips giving off a smell like damp earth. I thought of Aline's breasts, her way of squeezing them into tiny undergarments, as if her skin wasn't enough to separate them from the rest of the world. I thought I understood that it was a dessert made from red beans. His mother made it for him every week – yes, an only son, born in Osaka -, but this one here was store bought, his mother had passed away on the first day of spring, did I want to try it anyway?

I didn't have a chance to reply, neither, *a fortiori*, to express my condolences: the piece that was for me suddenly landed with a soft plop on my white skirt. With a quick thrust of his fork, the Japanese man flicked it off to avoid a stain, as he was saying in English, and in fact, despite its intense colour, the dessert left no trace on the linen. The Japanese man lifted up the armrest under which the culprit had landed, and as if it were a living creature, captured it in a paper napkin. Everything now under control, he apologised. He was sincerely sorry, flustered, he didn't know how to apologise. Another slice was presented to me. The dessert had a strange taste, very pasty, at once fresh and coarse. My neighbour was savouring it. For the first time since take-off, I could feel him drifting away from me. He was abandoning himself to this familial texture, this taste that must have brought back so many memories. His gestures were precise, cut a piece, place it on his tongue, slowly close his mouth. The ritual continued until the stewardess came round to remove the trays. Then, to my great surprise, the Japanese man shoved the rest of the block into his mouth all at once, he inhaled it, really, pressing the moist opening against his lips and breathing in before giving his tray back to the stewardess. It wasn't a

very pretty sight, his bulging cheeks, a bit monstrous, and the Japanese man seemed oblivious. To avoid embarrassing him, I pulled out the book that Loretta Flink had signed for me. How could she agree to have her book published with such a cover? A rough sketch of a young girl jumping rope in front of a man who, I would discover right from page one, was not her father. It was a sort of Harlequin Romance version of Lolita, with all the necessary innocence in the colours and vulgarity in the lines to transform a masterpiece into an object for quick consumption. The photo of Loretta crowned the back, retouched most likely, or certainly not too recent, as if it would have been less marketable to present the author's true face: her words plain and simple. I wondered how Japanese books were put together. I turned towards my neighbour. His face had returned to its initial form, his skin was smooth, his eyes closed. How old could he be? Twenty-five, thirty-five? At that moment, I gave him sixteen. His head was drooping to the right, his feet were pulled up onto the seat. He hadn't told me that he was tired, that he was going to snooze, in fact he had said not one of the simple phrases that would have sealed our complicity even beyond his sleep. My heart slowed, once again, I had been imagining things. I plunged into Loretta's book, happy to find a quick remedy for my deception. She was describing in first person her childhood in Ireland under the guidance of a stepfather obsessed with cleanliness who, during his drunken binges, forced her to scour every inch of the ground with a scrub brush. From those difficult days, she still had two marks below her knees, bony calluses that reminded her even today of the tyranny of this otherwise very handsome and incredibly intelligent man. There wasn't much mention of her mother, I wondered how the Japanese man's mother had died, an illness, an accident? The Japanese man who was moving often in his sleep: he must have been dreaming. I

couldn't concentrate, my grip loosened unconsciously, the book slid to the floor. I awoke three quarters of an hour later with the strange feeling of having changed shape. An organ had taken advantage of my slumber and developed in my body. The brown paste on my skirt, the astringent effect of the red beans, I believe I dropped back to sleep for a few more minutes and dreamt that my grandmother from Bretagne was dumping a pot of warm porridge on my navel, as if she wanted to make a mould. The plaster spread out slowly and the grey-haired old lady continued to pour, it was a bottomless pot, I thought opening my eyes, flakes without hunger, it was now snowing and with this image of winter whiteness, I really did wake up. At first, I saw his black hair. The Japanese man had stretched out. His head was on my knees, his eyes turned toward me, toward my womb.

My heart started to beat very hard once again. I could have slipped my hand down under his shoulder and, gently, given this sleeping body the signal to change positions. I could have moved, shifted about a little, I could have even justified getting up on the pretence of going to the washroom, but I did none of that: I remained motionless, moved before such abandon. I slid my legs slightly apart so that the man wouldn't be bothered by the folds of my skirt. I noticed a scar on the top of his forehead, a straight little mark followed by a semi-circle that looked like the punctuation mark that the Spanish place at the beginning of a question. ¿ Had he been in a fight? ¿Had he been struck by a sharp object falling from a roof? A tile, a pot of flowers, or a coin like that musician who, playing the accordion in a peaceful street, ended up in emergency: one of his generous listeners on the sixth floor had not respected the tradition of wrapping his offering in a piece of paper before throwing it from the window, which had resulted in three stitches

for the accordionist and a story to tell during shows he now offered in enclosed spaces, a tale that no one believed – yet it was true, the one about the coin falling from the sky. The Japanese man turned, he was now on his side, his nose between my legs. I had the desire to kiss this hollow mark, somewhat lighter than the rest of his skin, the desire to place my lips around the scar. Moving down his face, I would have licked the comma of skin that protected the corners of his eyes, I would have tried to lift it with the tip of my tongue. Everyone around us was sleeping, only the characters in the film projected on the screen were still moving about to make believe they were alive. I sighed, I couldn't seem to breathe normally. I looked at his hands, pressed between his thighs, he must be cold, I pulled his blanket up and tucked it under his shoulder. The Japanese man had a slight cold. Air went in through his nose, I saw his far nostril expand, then collapse, when it left by the other path, this open mouth that made you want to slip a finger inside. I felt his warm breath on my lips down below, his elastic breath that caressed me without end, rhythmically exhaling the world, our world suspended between earth and sky for we were still moving forward; this was what troubled me most of all, this enormous push of the airplane through the sky compared to the minuscule breath that was warming me, this wave transformed by the inside of his being, this wave that spoke to me of his lungs, his throat, his palate: I bent slowly down over him and breathed in his exhalation, my hands cupped together, as if to listen to his secret, to smell the scent of his tongue, to smell the scent of his teeth and to draw it inside of me – woven together we were, one on top of the other, one in the other, I held my breath in order to keep this part of him inside of me, I counted to ten, to twenty, I was a balloon, his white-skinned balloon, my head was spinning, and I told myself that life was worth living, I could have cried for a phrase like

that one, life is worth living, life is enough, but the Japanese man moved, his breathing became stronger and stronger, maybe he was caressing himself under the blanket, now he was moaning, and hearing this plaintive groan overwhelmed me. I felt my toes scrunch up, my body break into a sweat, clenching up around this wave that was carrying me away; I pressed my fist against my mouth, taking everything upon myself, everything in myself, at the bottom of my womb in a somersault, a frozen shiver. The Japanese man brusquely stretched out his legs, a tragic expression imprinted itself on his face, then everything returned to calmness and warmth.

Around us, no one, nothing had moved.

Translator's Commentary

Genesis...

During my lengthy wanderings last fall in the university library, I one day stumbled across an intriguing book by Alex Hughes called *French Erotic Fiction: Women Desiring Writing, 1880 – 1990.* I vaguely recall its enticingly glossy, red and black cover depicting a woman's face and full crimson lips, an image that I have sadly been unable to review, due to the book's mysterious disappearance from the library over the course of the past year. Succumbing to temptation, I delved into its pages with enthusiasm, discovering a genre of French literature up to then unexplored by my university studies. (A discovery which reminded me somehow of my pre-teen fascination with adult romance novels. On a kind of sex ed quest, my sister and I would scout these books out in the public library while our unsuspecting mother thought we were reading quality children's books. As Barthes might say (11), we took pleasure from the text by creating our own rhythm of reading and non-reading, skimming through the boring romance for the juicy sex scenes and reading them voraciously. We soon became avid readers of teen romances, those contemptible stories of female pining, with titles like "Kiss me Kit" or "April's Revenge.") Coincidently, that fall I also read Marie Nimier's *La nouvelle pornographie,* as part of the course work for a class on women's writing in French. It was a surprising, if not shocking, addition to the list of a dozen French novels to be read for the course. Certainly, it was the most openly sexual in content. At the same time, I was preparing a paper on feminist literary theory for yet another graduate course. During this period, so striking was the connection between the novel's themes and my own nascent (or perhaps rekindled) interest in feminism and pornoerotica written by women, sparked by my

discovery of Hughes' book, that the possibility of translating Nimier's novel began to creep into my mind. Perhaps, I thought, this could be a legitimate area of academic study. Thus, my eventual decision to translate *La nouvelle pornographie* came about like the pieces of a puzzle falling together, the gradual solving of a riddle that was ignited by the inter-relatedness of these books. In the end, this translation thesis has become a sort of personal crossroad where intersect my own interests in pornography, eroticism, women's literature, feminism, translation and most of all, self-discovery.

Motivations and Other Intangibles

Why translate pornoerotica?

Naturally, in a commentary about translating, it is necessary to reveal one's motivations as a translator in order to explain or somehow justify the choice of text. These explanations seem particularly essential when the text being translated is one that falls outside of the canon, when it sits on the borders of the literary genres commonly studied in academia. Yet, perhaps it is because of the marginal subject of my translation that I hesitate before such explanations. When it comes to the translation of pornoerotic literature, motivations can be a touchy subject. For, in my mind, to ask the question why translate a pornoerotic novel is something like asking why read a pornoerotic novel? or even, why write it? Why did Dominique Aury write *Histoire d'O?*[6] Why did Sabine d'Estrée translate it into English? At first glance, it seems an awkward question to have to answer, unless of course, as for the narrator of *La nouvelle pornographie,* it is possible to fall back on a publisher or editor's request to explain the undertaking. But for the student translator-writer, such as myself, without the demands of earning a living to justify

[6] Under the pseudonym Pauline Réage

working on a pornoerotic text (or any text for that matter), these two questions are uncomfortably alike, yet also deceivingly simplistic, for they do not capture the entire value of the undertaking, especially in the case of translating a novel like *La nouvelle pornographie*.

For my part, the attraction to translating Nimier's novel sprang as much from my fascination with her writing as with her choice of pornography for the focus of this particular work. Translating *La nouvelle pornographie* has been an enriching experience in literary translation that includes but is not limited to the problems of pornoerotic writing, for Nimier herself is a writer of great talent and the winner of several important literary prizes in France, not to mention the daughter of the well-known French author Roger Nimier. Like many French women who have contributed to the sub-genre "érograhique,"[7] Nimier is an adept writer whose work has been publicly recognized for its literary value. In fact, of the numerous female authors who have written French pornoerotic novels since the 1980s, Nimier is one of those on the outskirts of the genre; that is to say that the majority of her writing falls outside of the pornoerotic. Moreover, *La nouvelle pornographie* is more a very conscious, even self-conscious, commentary on this genre than simply an addition to the contemporary corpus of pornoerotic, female-authored novels written in French. As such, it is not entirely accurate to compare her to such writers as Maïna Lecherbonnier or Catherine Millet whose literary contributions do not extend beyond the range of "l'érographie," nor to equate the translation of this novel as a project focussing solely on the translation of pornography or erotica. Nimier's novel is published by Gallimard and has not been scooped up by the typical publishers of

[7] This term was first used by Gaëtan Brulotte in his 1998 book *Œuvres de chair*.

female-authored erotica.[8] Interestingly, it is also her only novel that has never been translated into English, while it has been translated into Italian, Hungarian, Romanian and even Japanese.

In point of fact, while I find the genre of pornographic and erotic writing by women to be a fascinating subject for study and criticism, especially as it relates and interacts with other systems of literature and with feminist concerns, my choice of Marie Nimier's *La nouvelle pornographie* does not begin and end with this common denominator. Having over the course of the past year read the complete corpus of her works (excluding plays and children's books) beginning with *La Sirène* (1985) and ending with *La reine du silence* (2004), I have a clear picture of what attracts me to Nimier as a writer. It is certainly possible that I would have chosen another of her novels to translate, had they not all been already translated into English. I am very much attracted to her style of writing, which has gradually become more and more openly auto-fictional. Her narrative style resembles the stream-of-consciousness writing of authors like Virgina Woolf whom I greatly admire. In addition to the appealing flow and auto-fictional aspect of her writing, I also enjoy its subtle underlying intertexuality with other literature, her own and that of others (like Nin, Lacan, Freud, even the Surrealists and other female authors of pornoerotica) which leaves the reader puzzling over many seeming references and interconnections. For example, the basic plot of *La nouvelle pornographie* calls to mind the very circumstances under which Anaïs Nin wrote her own erotic stories and the opening short story featuring "the President" seems to echo Jelinek's violent "Direktor" in *Lust.* Moreover, for me, Nimier's writing does in fact have

[8] For example, the series POCKET published in France is one of the main sources of female-authored pornoerotica. They have introduced or republished such authors as Nedjma, Lecherbonnier, Simpère, Rey and more.

the same seductive "sous-texte licencieux" (Nimier 40) that the editor Gabriel in *La nouvelle pornographie* remarks in Marie's writing. And there is also an appealing psychological aspect to her stories; she delves into the minds of her characters as they live and breathe the story. Furthermore, I admire the self-reflexivity in Nimier's writing. She creates the very self-aware voice of a writer who does not pretend to be absent; a metatextual commentary is woven into her novels, and thus the reader is not left to float into an imaginary world created by Nimier: the story's artificiality is regularly brought back to the reader's attention. Moments of blunt self-reflexivity are abundant throughout the novel and are often employed by Nimier to humorous effect. For instance, the pornographic story that begins the novel concludes with the narrator awakening to find herself in front of her laptop in the kitchen, and, feeling dizzyingly off-centred, the reader suddenly realises that the preceding text was in fact what Marie had just been writing. In *La nouvelle pornographie,* in particular, this relationship between author, narrator and reader is playfully manipulated. In short, the quality and creativity of her writing alone might have drawn me to Nimier for the sheer pleasure of translating her texts. Looking back, I believe I was, in a way, seduced by her flirtatious use of language– as Barthes says, the writing must desire the reader (Barthes 1975, 6).

Doubly erotic: translating pornoerotica

And yet this explanation is incomplete, for my attraction to the translation of pornoerotic writing, though related to Nimier's appeal, surely extends deeper and wider: I am, in general, thoroughly refreshed by the open treatment of female sexuality and desire that I have found in French novels written by women like Angot, Bernheim, Colette, Lecherbonnier, Ernaux, Nimier, Simpère (the list could go on and on). It is as though

when reading their novels, a closed door is opened to me, as though I have a glimpse into a culture where human sexuality is less taboo, and sexual exchanges and encounters are, to a greater degree, a fact of daily life. (At the moment, I'm remembering Ernaux's *L'événement* – the blunt retelling of her own near-death experience with abortion in the 1970s.) This seems more honest writing, more free from inhibitions, and its warm openness attracts me. It is a kind of pleasurable escape into a different universe, a form of *jouissance*. And the pleasure is doubly satisfying for growing out of a two-fold process: that of both reading and translating the text. In an academic encounter with pornoerotica, these intellectual pleasures of the mind (reading, writing, translating) are transformed into a fuller, more bodily experience. As D.H. Lawrence seems to me to argue in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, the "mental life" has a certain hollowness when completely cut off from the physical world. Yet this more holistic pleasure need not spring only from the experience of studying pornoerotica: couldn't an erotics of reading, writing and translating in any genre reconnect body and mind, offering one greater access to creativity?

Undoubtedly, there is also an aspect to my pleasure in working with these French women writers and their open sexual content that derives from the literally stunning contradiction of combining well-written, carefully constructed stories with lurid topics like rape, orgies, infidelities, one night stands – for these French or Francophone women writers are educated and talented in their craft. Isn't this the source of the beauty of a novel like *Histoire d'O* in which elegant, poignant words describe subjection and torture? Consider the scene in the middle of *Histoire d'O,* when O ritually prepares her body according to the dictates of Roissy just before meeting Sir Stephen. The writing opens a

window into an intimate moment: a woman's toilette, such a quiet and peaceful ritual but, in this case, one not without a repulsive quality due to the physical control and emotional subjection it reveals. It seems to me that this may be what Roland Barthes refers to when, in *Le plaisir du texte*, he comments on Sade's writing; he describes the pleasure of the text as "là où s'entrevoit la mort du language (Barthes 2000, 87)", "la faille," "les bords," "la coupure" (87). As Barthes suggests, the pleasure in such texts, the erotics of them, is not so much in the "strip-tease corporel" (90), in other words, not in the nudity nor the sexual intercourse, but rather in the interstices, the tears, the space created between language and authorial intention. So that something which is grotesque can also reveal depth and charm. Moreover, the beauty of these French erotic texts perhaps also resides in their enticing madness. Contemporary sex therapist, Esther Perel gets it bang-on when she writes of the crisis of desire in modern coupling: "eroticism requires separateness…(it) thrives in the space between the self and the other (xv)." Eroticism lives in the void, in uncertainty, in uncanniness. In translation, is it not this impossibility (Scott 5), this irreparable schism between translator and author, between target and source, between intention and understanding, that creates the intense desire to attempt it? Here is the erotics of translation. Another idea of Barthes: the text desires to be read and creates this desire out of "that bit of neurosis necessary to the seduction of (its) readers (Barthes, 1975, 6)." And so the reader and translator are seduced by this neurotic writing, in the case of female-authored pornoerotica, by these women who desire to be seen publicly unveiling their most private sensations and experiences. How different are they than other exhibitionists like the cyclist and the young woman at the dentist's, described in *La nouvelle pornographie* (148-152)? And thus, doesn't the reader's (and translator's)

pleasure come from a sort of voyeurism, a private peep show? There is almost a doubling of perversity as I, the translator, enter this domain. As Barthes writes: "I observe clandestinely the pleasure of others, I enter perversion (17)."

Literature, translation, and self-discovery

Although it may seem a digression from the current discussion, I want to quote contemporary French author and feminist, Annie Ernaux, who has herself dipped into the genre of erotic literature. Recently, I was touched by the closing paragraph of her novel *Passion Simple*; this paragraph captures a very important idea that I share with Ernaux:

> Quand j'étais enfant, le luxe, c'était pour moi les manteaux de fourrure, les robes longues et les villas au bord de la mer. Plus tard, j'ai cru que c'était de mener une vie d'intellectuel. Il me semble maintenant que c'est aussi de pouvoir vivre une passion pour un homme ou une femme (Ernaux 77).

I would, however, extend her thought slightly further to propose that true luxury is to follow one's passion, period – whether it be man, woman, hobby, or profession – through careful attention, each person discovers her own passions whether people, things or actions. Choosing to embrace them takes honesty, bravery, resolution, and even to some extent a letting-go of previous conceptions of self. It is both a luxury and a risk to uncover our greatest desires by pursuing them.

For my part, it is an on-going journey of self-discovery that has led me to write a Master's thesis on desire in translation and to work with erotic or pornographic texts. Having spent years pouring time and energy into work that was ultimately meaningless to me, I resolved at the time of my return to academic studies that I would no longer compromise my passion for language and literature. The study of language, literature and translation requires of the student a level of personal honesty, openness and reflection [not to mention humbleness where foreign language learning is concerned! I wonder if

this attraction to language and its sometimes painful challenges is close to what Barthes means when he writes "I am interested in language because it wounds or seduces me (Barthes 1975, 38)"] that has great appeal to me. This intimate look, through reading and translation, at the writing and thoughts of another, the author, fills a desire that I have for communication, for close and fulfilling interactions that do not skate about on the surface of life but dig deep into its meaning. This attraction to literature, reading, writing and translation seems to me to be related to what Sartre calls "la liberté" which is inherently the subject of all good literature (70). Reading (and studying) literature as well as writing about it demands the application of free will and faith; it draws me into an interdependent relationship with the writer or reader in which we together create writing that unveils the world and our place within it (70). It demands activity and engagement, thinking and questioning. And these demands are ironically freeing. The mind is released from lethargy, from slumber, from the disease of television and the mundane treadmill of material existence. Buy this, buy that, acquire this, acquire that. Money, prestige, power those friends of egotism. Not that I believe this freedom to be absolute. Even within literary studies, there is much to distract from "liberté." The ego-centred pursuit of fame and success (always defined by others) blossoms as much in the realm of intellectual and literary pursuits as in any other profession. It is for this reason, I believe, that Sartre defines freedom as an on-going process when he writes: "elle n'est rien d'autre que le mouvement par quoi perpétuellement on s'arrache et se libère (75)."

Reading, writing, translating and finding intimacy

Thus, it is through the act of reading that "the other" engages with the author in this interwoven search for freedom. So it is also for the translator. Many translation scholars before me have remarked upon the likeness of translation to close reading. For instance in her 1989 book *Autour de Ferron*, Betty Bednarski writes:

> La traduction m'apparaît d'abord comme une lecture. Traduire, comme lire, c'est poser sur l'œuvre un regard de découvreur, à la fois chercheur et faiseur de sens. C'est retracer le dessein de l'auteur, cerner le tout de l'œuvre, en déduire les principes et, dans les conditions de ma relativité et de mon historicité, *re*construire un sens (des sens) (11).

In a book written ten years later, Clive Scott offers a similar description of translation as "the embodiment of the experience of reading, a record of an encounter with an other which is negotiated into a self (5)." And I echo my agreement with their view. For me, translation is the closest point of connection between writer and reader. The translator by performing both acts, walks between and links the two actors like a kind of conduit of energy and meaning that transcends time and space. Through translation, I have felt the closest to the text and its author that I have ever come as a reader. It has been like climbing into the mind of another and examining her thoughts. For me, it is one of the most satisfying forms of intimate contact. And I wonder, does the author realise this almost union with her translator? Betty Bednarski describes this closeness as a basic human need when she writes: "se projeter dans la conscience d'un autre, se laisser circonscrire par lui, que ce soit en littérature ou ailleurs, répond à un besoin et à un fait fondamental de l'existence humaine (79)…C'est par l'autre que chacun tentera de se circonscrire et de donner un sens à sa vie (81)." Other writers and artists have formulated similar views. For example, in *Waking Life*, a fictional animated film written and directed by Richard Linklater in 2002, the main character is searching for answers to the meaning of life. During one of his many dream-like interactions, an American female scholar

shares with him her belief that the human struggle to communicate meets a very primary need that humans have to transcend our inherent isolation in order to connect spiritually with those around us. She argues that our need to be understood by others through communication is what we live for, no matter how transient that feeling of union might be. Human beings are constantly striving to speak that which is unspeakable in our experience of living. I believe that, in a sense, writing is a form of speaking and reading a form of listening that carries this human striving for connection to greater reaches –to articulate the unspeakable with the written word.

In this way, translation is clearly more than just reading, it is also writing. Moreover, according to Sartre: "Écriture et lecture sont les deux faces d'un même fait d'histoire…(78)." Bednarski reiterates this idea by stating that "…la lecture est l'autre face de l'écriture (106)." In his book *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?,* Sartre also describes writing as a kind of "dévoilement" on the part of the author, and when I link this idea to the practice of translation, it seems to me that even for the translator as writer or rewriter, there is an engagement in the text that resembles the author's self-revelation. Sartre has suggested that "un des principaux motifs de la création artistique est certainement le besoin de nous sentir essentiels par rapport au monde (46)," and that in order to accomplish this, the artist "(recourt) à la conscience d'autrui pour se faire reconnaître comme *essentiel* à la totalité de l'être (67)." To write is to expose one's point of view and to ask others to engage, to hear, to read what one has to say. So too is translation, as a form of writing, also a revelation of subjectivity and a call for readers. The very act of interpreting the original through translation is form of exposure. But just what does the translation unveil to the reader? The translator's own central subjectivity in the creation

of the target text is multi-faceted, beginning with the choice of text to translate and filtering down into the very words that appear in the final product consumed by the target audience. Why this text? Why these words? (I will further examine the translator's word selection in the second half of this commentary.) In this way, much like the author, the translator unveils her personal pleasure in performing (Barthes 9) this text for the target reader.

This brings me back to the idea of the translator-reader-writer as voyeur, and I would add, as exhibitionist exposing herself to the world. Sartre argues that the writer and reader depend upon each other to create the work of art: "Ainsi la lecture est un pacte de générosité entre l'auteur et le lecteur; chacun fait confiance à l'autre, chacun compte sur l'autre, exige de l'autre autant qu'il exige de lui-même (62)." In other words, the writer and reader have a sort of co-dependent relationship (like the exhibitionist and the voyeur?). Thus, one question that I ask myself as translator and reader of pornoerotica: who is the voyeur and who is the exhibitionist? Where does the translator fall between the writer and the reader in this ultra intimate union of reading and writing? The privilege of the translator is to be a hybrid, the writer-reader, the reader-writer.

Thus, the translator moves into this realm of communication between writer and reader (speaker and listener) and becomes herself a part of this mysterious interaction of self-definition through otherness, through the attempt to voice the unspeakable. What greater closeness to this "other" than to actually read and then translate a text in which the author deals with sexuality, pornography and erotica, among the most personal and unspeakable of human experiences? For, if the acts of writing and translating are intimate forms of communication from the start, how much more so when they delve into the very

personal territory of sexual desire? Here their closeness moves from the airy world of the mind into the fleshy domain of the body.

In a way, like the paint in the stairwell of Marie's apartment, beneath my attraction to the translation of Nimier's novel *La nouvelle pornographie* are several layers: firstly, an attraction to the very personal topic she chose to tackle; secondly, a desire for the intimate style of her writing that quenches my own thirst for closeness; but lastly, at the base there is also simply my own need for self-definition through the spiritual communion with the other that I can derive from translation, and which feeds into my own search for meaning in life. Perhaps this communion is in some way related to Benjamin's idea of pure language, to his belief that through translation we move closer to a common language spoken by all – a kind of "superhistorical kinship" between human beings (78). My experience translating *La nouvelle pornographie* calls to my mind that of another translator-writer, the fictional Maude Laures of Nicole Brossard's *Le Désert mauve* who loses herself in the novel's confusion of identities between author, narrator and translator. For Laures, as for myself, translation is about temptation by, desire for and connection with the text: "Il était possible que tout cela ne puisse advenir que si, par le détail, elle entrait dans l'univers de la narratrice…(56)." The novel's English translator, Suzanne Lotbinière-Harwood also claims a physical connection through desire to the text. For her, the act of translation requires a physical arousal of what she calls her "translating body" (60) which brings her transformation rather than alienation in the process (65). It is also related to Nimier's decision to use the first person in *La nouvelle pornographie* and to her choice to use her own name and identity for the main character. As Marie says when trying to explain these choices:

> Je reviens à cette idée d'écrire les nouvelles pornographiques en mon *propre* nom. Longtemps j'ai hésité de me mettre en scène de façon aussi explicite, mais il me semble aujourd'hui que c'était la seule manière d'aborder honnêtement la proposition de l'éditeur. Non que ma propension à me confesser eût gagné du terrain, du grand déballage je me sentais fort éloignée, mais pour une raison plus souterraine : il m'aurait été impossible de faire vivre à une autre, fût-elle imaginaire, les débordements que je m'infligeais en tant que narratrice. Je me mouillais, comme disait Aline, je prenais sur moi, et par conséquent, symboliquement, j'avais tous les droits. Voilà ce que je gagnais en payant de ma personne, de ma première personne : la liberté de me travestir, de m'inventer, de me remodeler à loisir sans culpabilité majeure et même avec une certaine jubilation, et sans autre prétention que de servir le texte qui m'était commandé (110).

It seems that a personal identification with the written or translated text enlarges the writer's creative space, through an attempt at connection rather than maintaining the inherent separation. For my part, this desire for open, intimate writing and communion through language is a very deep level reason for the choice, not only to work with Nimier's writing, but with this text in particular, and it is, I believe, the crux of my entire pursuit of literary and translation studies.

Feminist motivations

From the beginning of the present commentary, I have plunged head first into what were, for me, the most hidden, unexplored motivations for my translation of *The New Pornography*. It has been a process of self-exposure that has often left me feeling uncomfortable and even, at times, frighteningly vulnerable. At present, I want to swim back up to the surface to catch my breath. For, there are yet other more evident reasons to translate a pornographic or erotic text that also came into play as I weighed my options last winter before beginning to translate Nimier's novel. These reasons centre on my relationship with feminism and the women's movement.

A significant reason for my desire to translate and work with women's writing on sexuality is my strong affinity with feminism. As an undergraduate student of language

and literature, I often wondered why I was always reading books written by men? What about the women writers? Where were they? For a time I even avoided reading men's literature as a sort of reactionary measure. I wanted to hear what women have had to say about life through their writing. Today I am especially curious about what they have to say on the subject of sex, that ubiquitous subject, often on the mind but rarely discussed comfortably.

It's odd and also paradoxical in some ways, this continuing taboo surrounding women's expression of sexuality. Despite the progress made during the sexual revolution of the sixties and the concurrent feminist movement, despite the proliferation of sexual content in media and communication, despite the keen interest that consumers continue to show in sex and related topics, pornoerotica as both a literary and film genre remains controversial and relatively little examined, academically speaking, in proportion to its piece of the market (Williams 8). Yet as an area of film or literary studies, many fascinating questions can be found for study. For example, are women becoming the dominant writers of pornoerotic texts? If so, why? Are women strikingly absent from the production of visual pornoerotica and pornoerotic films? And again, if so, why? What can be learned about a culture from its production of pornography and erotica in art and in consumer products? In the area of translation, what taboos or limitations are there in the publication of foreign pornoerotica? Is there something to be learned from what is translated and what is not? How do translators work around cultural differences in attitudes and norms surrounding human sexuality? My experiences while translating *La nouvelle pornographie* seem to indicate that despite these intriguing questions and potential areas of research, few choose to venture seriously in this direction. Or at least it

seems to be out of fashion academically, dated perhaps: a remnant of feminism that has little place among current trends in academia. For my part, the pursuit of translating female-authored erotica is something like the feminist "defiance" of Linda Williams when she wrote *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and the Frenzy of the Visible,* her book about pornoerotic film. This master's thesis on desire in translation is in part the result of my wish to move contemporary expressions of female desire from the realm of the unspoken into the realm of the spoken.

Veiled motivations?

Citing reasons of self-discovery, feminism, and academic curiosity, I have attempted to leave no leaf unturned in my exploration of the motivations that brought about my translation of this novel. Still, in the back of my mind, I wonder if there is something I've missed. Some psychological issue that I have not uncovered that draws me to smut, to pornography, which, as the famous quote by Alain Robbe-Grillet so clearly points out, is simply "other people's erotica" (Phillips 194). It has even occurred to me that it may be a way for me to gain sexual experience without having to actively engage in promiscuity myself. Perhaps it has also allowed me a change of perspective, like the one Aline suggests to Marie when she says "te mouiller, répondre à une commande, écrire quelque chose d'un peu différent de ta différence habituelle…C'est bon, parfois, de bousculer ses habitudes, ça donne de la force (39)." A voyeuristic and passive endeavour for the sexually curious but stiflingly shy? But the mind is an enigma, and I will perhaps never fully understand my choice to translate a novel containing explicit sex scenes and acts in which I may never have personally engaged. Nor be able to entirely explain my keen interest in reading as much as possible of the classic texts of this genre like Sade,

Bataille, Apollinaire, Colette, Leduc, Cixous, Duras. Why am I not offended by the violence? Nor even by the belittlement and objectification of women? Nor by bisexuality, homosexuality, lesbianism, bestiality, necrophilia, scatology, self-mutilation? Many acts that in reality I would likely never be willing to endure, I can read about without much difficulty. This lack of discomfort during the reading experience may be due to the tangible distance between reality and imagination, between act and representation. After all, reading is a private and not a public experience. Hidden away in the mind. But at the same time, do all readers experience the pornoerotic text in the same way? Are some readers offended? Do some readers avoid texts that challenge commonly accepted sexual values and practices? The history of the censorship of these texts would lead one to think that many are the readers who cannot separate the real from the representation. (Interestingly, for my part, I can attest to a significant difference in my experience of erotic or pornographic literature and my experience of the same genre of film. For example, the film interpretation of a book like *Baise-moi* by Despentes is much more emotionally disturbing to me than her book itself. How does the viewing of film as a form of representation differ from the experience of reading?) In any case, these are fascinating, introspective questions, but questions for the moment without definitive answers. Again, I am reminded, in a way, of Brossard's Maude Laures who "ne saurait jamais pourquoi tout son être s'est enfoncé dans un livre (55)."

Private to public: a kind of academic strip-tease

Aside from the difficulty of attempting to answer, after the fact, these troubling questions of motivation, probably the greatest obstacle I faced in the translation of *La nouvelle pornographie* is one that has stayed with me throughout the process and one that I

continue to grapple with on a daily basis. This challenge is both psychological and social: the fact is that I wasn't sure I *could* translate pornography or erotica for a master's thesis. It is one thing to read it privately, but quite another thing to have it as the focus of one's work. The movement of discussions of sexuality from the private to the public sphere of my life was one that I was not sure (and am still not entirely sure) I was ready to embrace. What would people think of me? Would they think I am a pervert or some kind of slut if I show an interest in pornography? Would they wonder if I sleep around and engage in bizarre sexual practices if I have read and studied Sade? Being a translator of pornoerotica seems to open up a deeply personal and perhaps socially unacceptable aspect to one's character for full view. I certainly wonder if women scholars don't want to deal with erotic literature for fear of been found out a slut, if male scholars worry about being thought obsessed with sex or even sexist. In point of fact, in his recent article "Translating Sexuality," S. Rao surveyed sixteen translators of pornoerotic material on the Internet, many of whom attested to hushing up this aspect to their work to the point of omitting from their CVs. Clearly, keeping sexuality a private question is infinitely more comfortable, temptingly safe. Once again, I identify with *La nouvelle pornographie's* narrator Marie who recounts the story of a writer friend who had, like Marie, been asked to write pornography. This friend had subsequently abandoned the project – he couldn't finish it since he spent all his time masturbating. Like Marie, I have repeatedly considered following his example, "abandonner, je veux dire" (133). Like her, I have wished for this project to be over so that I can take up studying something more socially acceptable, something I can be comfortable discussing with other scholars, some intellectual topic which I can be at ease submitting for conference paper proposals. And

yet, I have persisted, for on a gut level, I sense in the study of human sexuality and desire through literature and translation a great opportunity, not only for self-understanding but also for cultural and societal insights.

Eventually, I overcame the initial inhibition that these kinds of worries posed, at least enough to continue. Pushing through my reluctance, I made the decision do pursue what interests me despite what people might say or think. I wanted to totally challenge myself – to transcend that barrier of prudishness and conservatism – the still powerful remnants of my church-going protestant upbringing. But simply making this decision wasn't enough to get entirely beyond the creeping negative thoughts that have continued to surround my "pornoerotic" translation thesis. Nevertheless, I was at first quite enthusiastic. When people asked me what I was studying for my thesis, I told them flat out that I was looking at female-authored pornography and translating Nimier's novel. Rarely had anyone ever heard of *La nouvelle pornographie*, much less read it. Generally, the reactions I got ranged from outright surprise ("I never expected it of you") to a silent, blank stare and a quick change of topic. Some people laughed and thought it was amusing. Others expressed polite interest but found it essential to impress upon me that their own research interest did not include this type of literature – could never extend into that genre. There were even those who told me that pornography is dull, repetitive[9] and uninteresting for academic study – hence its systematic exclusion from university syllabi. Perhaps the most unpleasant of reactions were the hostile looks of disapproval that I received from those who seemed to be saying "you should be ashamed of yourself." At times, I've felt almost meretricious, like Aline and Marie during their encounter with

[9] One might counter this argument with Barthes' idea that extravagant repetition can be erotic, that "repetition creates bliss" (40).

Helmut toward the beginning of *La nouvelle pornographie*. "Pas banal comme boulot, ah, ah, c'était la première fois qu'il rencontrait des…en chair et en os des…(46)" he says to them and laughs when they suggest "des écrivains" as the elusive word to name their profession. In fact, working with a pornoerotic text by choice, is perhaps for the female translator a way of experiencing what it might be like to be a prostitute, the closest academic activity to the "oldest female profession." It may be a way to come to understand the social stigma, the scorn and hatred directed at women whose business is sex.

Thus, it didn't take long for me to realise that perhaps open discussion of my thesis topic was less desirable than I had initially thought. It really only took one academic conference at which I had to say the words "con" and "bite" for me to seriously question my decision to work on the translation of this genre of literature – regardless of how fascinating for me personally. It did seem to be a shocking topic even among the educated who have turned out to be less open-minded or at least more timid than I expected. Clearly in this part of the world (my personal experiences took place in Alberta and Québec), sexuality and related subjects are still covered with a layer of taboo even nearly fifty years after the supposed sexual revolution and despite the undeniable popularity of pornography both visual and written – its abundance in popular culture, which it turns out is more likely a sign of a profit driven consumer market than of a societal open-mindedness toward expressions of human sexuality (Perel 91).

At that one conference where I discussed some aspects of my work, I had my first taste of the difficulty of speaking publicly about sex. In this environment, there were a few genuinely interesting questions raised. Yet, the most engaging discussions about my

presentation came afterwards in informal and more private situations. Being someone who by nature avoids the brightness and heat of the spotlight, I found that publicly discussing the translation of pornoerotic writing is extremely uncomfortable, for multiple reasons. Firstly, such a presentation is likely to be the only one of its kind at an academic conference and will therefore stand out awkwardly among the less intimate subjects. Secondly, the topic becomes the butt of jokes and humorous comments as participants attempt to relieve their own discomfort. It seems that the majority of literary scholars would prefer to leave questions of sexuality to sociologists, psychologists and psychiatrists.

Yet, it's evident that I am hardly the only scholar of literature who ever wanted to examine pornography and erotica, for information on this topic is abundant: books on Sade, books on women's erotic writing, histories of pornography, books on pornographic films, not to mention the innumerable novels that fall into this category – many of which are considered important pieces of literature, though perhaps rarely taught[10]. However, I would argue that there is much to be gained from studying pornoerotica and its translation. Many fascinating questions about a culture's values and mores surface when examining its relationship with and production of pornoerotic material. To conclude this first section of translation commentary, I offer a quote by Itmar Even-Zohar, taken from an essay on polysystem theory, as it reinforces for me the legitimacy of studying pornoerotic texts and succinctly captures my thoughts on working with pornoerotica in an academic setting:

> Further, it may seem trivial, yet warrants special emphasis, that the polysystem hypothesis involves a rejection of value judgements as criteria for an *a priori* selection of the objects of study. This must be particularly stressed for literary studies, where

[10] For example, *Histoire d'O, Justine, Lady Chatterley's Lover*, among others.

> confusion between criticism and research still exists. If one accepts the polysystem hypothesis, then one must also accept that the historical study of literary polysystems cannot confine itself to the so-called "masterpieces", even if some would consider them the only *raison d'être* of literary studies in the first place. This kind of elitism cannot be compatible with literary historiography just as general history can no longer be the life stories of kings and generals. In other words, as scholars committed to the discovery of the mechanisms of literature, there seems to be no way for us to avoid recognizing that any prevalent value judgments of any period are themselves an integral part of these mechanisms. No field of study, whether mildly or more rigorously "scientific", can select its objects according to norms of taste (13).

Practicalities: translating *La nouvelle pornographie*

For the remainder of this commentary, I will focus on the actual process of translating Marie Nimier's *La nouvelle pornographie* in order to examine the numerous other challenges involved, beyond the social and psychological obstacles discussed above. Although I cannot claim to have encountered every conundrum that a translator of this genre might tangle with (for example, Nimier's novel is relatively free of violent sexual acts), by revealing some of the more technical difficulties involved in my translation, I hope to begin to sketch a more general portrait of the translator of pornoerotic material in action.

These challenges faced during my translation of *La nouvelle pornographie* can be divided into 6 categories: lexicon; humour, satire and word play; self-reflexivity; style; sexual content; and finally, foreignization versus domestication. Within these, some will clearly be very much the usual challenges faced by any translator, while others will have specific relevance for translators of the pornoerotic genre.

Lexical difficulties

Every translator must puzzle over lexicon - it seems to me this just comes with the territory. For the purposes of this discussion, examples from my work on *La nouvelle*

pornographie can essentially focus in on two groups: words related to women's work which are, in a way, representative of the general lexical challenges in the text, and those words related specifically to pornography. Examining these two groups reveals a striking and intentional juxtaposition in Nimier's writing of everyday words with obscenity. The first quotidian group of lexical difficulties arose quite simply from the standard problem of moving between non-native and native languages. In *La nouvelle pornographie*, there is a whole collection of words related to running a household, performing household tasks typically assigned to women: cooking, cleaning and this sort of thing, as Gabriel Tournon would call it, "la science du ménage" (98). These can be rather obscure words for a translator, unless she has spent considerable time actually living in the source culture (and with native speakers I might add) their meanings can be tough to ferret out, for cultural differences can certainly show themselves in the little details of daily living. And thus, even finding equivalents for such words in the target culture isn't always simple; a successful word hunt can really depend as much on personal knowledge of these chores as on the skilful use of dictionaries. One example that comes to mind that will illustrate this point is the term "cassette anticalcaire" on page 18 of the original. Here's the full sentence:

> ...Aline dut me prendre pour une folle, pourquoi étais-je allongée sur la nouvelle planche, celle que nous venions d'acheter à crédit malgré nos difficultés financières, la cassette anticalcaire par terre, baignant dans son jus d'eau du robinet, et moi les cuisses écartée, bien pleine d'un instrument branché à la place du fer.

And my translation :

> ...Aline must have thought I was a lunatic, why was I lying on the new ironing board, the one we had just bought on credit despite our financial difficulties, the anti-calcium cartridge on the floor soaking in its tap water juice, and me spread-eagled on the board, stuffed full of some instrument plugged in where the iron should have been.

Not being much of an ironer myself and living in a place where water quality does not require the use of anti-calcium tablets when ironing, I was, at first, stumped by this term. Fortunately, an Internet search turned up a French website selling household appliances, and I was able to resolve the mystery of the "cassette anticalcaire." But other problems remain semi-unresolved like the term "planche à glacer" (98) which seems to be some old-fashioned instrument used by chambermaids for ironing clothing.

Not surprisingly, the second group of word problems is unique to pornoerotica and involves the wide range of vocabulary used to discuss sex and related topics. Dictionaries of erotic terms do exist[11] and are somewhat helpful to the translator of this genre. Also recommended – being well read in the target culture's own pornoerotic genre. [A knowledge gap for me and an area where I need to catch up should I continue studying the genre. I only hope it doesn't require a return to the romance novels of my youth – is there not pornoerotic *literature* in English? I wonder if the English language version of the genre is vapid, and I remember Barthes' discussion of "humiliated repetition" (42) as I recall the plot lines of Harlequin Romances...] Particularly troublesome were body parts, especially the sex organs. French synonyms for penis and vagina are abundant, in both Guiraud's unilingual and Van Hoof's bilingual dictionaries. Despite its reputation for being less open to matters of sexual expression, English words for these same parts are not lacking, as becomes obvious from even a quick glance through Van Hoof's book. In fact, there is often overlap between the sex vocabulary used in these two languages. For example, in both languages, "thing" or "machine" can refer to sex organs. Moreover, for some categories, English options are more abundant (as is

[11] Such as Henri Van Hoof's bilingual *Les mots de la chose* or the older French *Dictionnaire érotique* by Pierre Guiraud.

the case for Van Hoof's English lists of synonyms for "pénis," "le sexe de la femme," as well as "l'acte sexuel: le coït" –just to name a few). Nimier certainly gave me ample opportunity to put my creativity to use and forced me to stretch beyond my usual vocabulary. In only the first twenty-five pages of *La nouvelle pornographie*, she employs a wide variety of terms to name male and female genitalia: for men: "sexe," "bite," "biroute," "braguette," "joujou," "queue," "tube," "onzième doigt," "giraffe," "verge;" for women: "creux," "minette," "con," "sexe," "ventre." With this plethora of terms in the original, I was worried about overusing the typical "cock" and "cunt" in English. I came up with a short list, my own personal and very specific thesaurus, to which I referred intermittently throughout the rest of the translation. My selection for men contained words like "bird," "stick," "sausage," "thing," "tool," "tube," "ying-yang," "wiener," "winkle," "whanger," "whang," "weenie," "weapon"... Not all of them were useful but it helped to open my mind to the possibilities. After researching these terms, I think it would be inaccurate to say that one language is richer than the other in terms of erotic words, at least judging from the lists of synonyms in Van Hoof's dictionary. However, there are not always directly interchangeable translations. For example, the word "ventre" in French can mean "stomach" or "womb". But writing "womb" in an English erotic text seems slightly odd and more reproductive than erotic. On the contrary, the word "ventre" is found in many French erotic texts from Sade to Réage to Nimier. In any case, playing with this sort of vocabulary was pleasurable in the sense that it broadened my perspective as I began to see how almost any word can be eroticised. Take for example, Nimier's eroticisation of ironing, this "activité épanoussante" (yet the most boring of household tasks, it seems to me), in her opening story about Jolicoeur &

Company. The iron is "l'outil, la chose qui agit dans la main de l'homme" (12) but the support, the table with its "capacité de rétention" (12) has become the new focus. Clearly this isn't simply a discussion of ironing as becomes quite apparent when the story evolves into an odd sort of ironing demo/orgy…

Humour, Satire and Word-play

A second textual aspect that posed a stumbling block when translating Nimier's novel was the humour, satire and word play. How was I to transmit the essence of these passages from her writing into my translation? From this experience, I have concluded that there is no ideal solution to such questions in translation. I saw that each situation contained its own unique obstacles and numerous possible resolutions. One of the trickiest passages for me was the one which opens the novel. This first paragraph is, in fact, almost a microcosm of the novel's translation problems, the perfect sample of what is to come. In this paragraph, Nimier plays with the idea of a "baldaquin," a four-poster bed with a curtain. The word play here is between "tirer mon baldaquin" and "tirer un coup" (a slang expression probably equivalent in register to "to fuck" in English). At first, I translated literally with " pull my four-poster" but the essence of the idea seemed to evaporate along the way. Intended sexual connotations were sorely absent. In the end, this is perhaps the passage that required the most creative rewriting. It was a very difficult starting point for a novice translator. My solution was to work with the idea of Aline's bed being a kind of stage. The end result, though literally distant from Nimier's original, attempts to recreate her playfulness of language and her erotic allusions, and yet, I must admit that significant aspects of the original paragraph were inimitable.

Such humorous, satirical games with words and sexual allusions are characteristic of the novel, and thus, examples abound, particularly in the stories Marie writes for the editor. As a final example, on page 35 of the novel (page 39 of my translation), I encountered another sticky passage, this time full of alliteration used for humorous effect. Nimier's game was with the letter F: "faire," "neuf," "fric," "foutre," "froc froissé," "foufoune," "femelle," "franc," "frigo." Unable to maintain the F-words throughout while keeping the meaning, I had to compromise with splitting the alliteration into two groups: C-words like "cash," "crumpled" and "cunt" as well as a few F-words, "female," "feast," "few," "francs," "fill" and "fridge." Admittedly, breaking up the alliteration did dilute its effect, and yet for me, the translation of this passage does retain a certain satirical flavour.

The challenges of self-reflexivity

Self-reflexivity, an essential quality in *La nouvelle pornographie*, posed the third test of my newly forming translation skills. As writer and narrator, both (the fictional) Nimier and the fictional Marie are openly present throughout the reading experience in a kind of metatext within the novel. So how does this become problematic in translation? One of the simpler examples can be found in the story about Jolicoeur & Company and its revolutionary ironing board (on the first page of the sample translation provided with this commentary). In the third paragraph of the novel's first chapter, the narrator, Marie, brings the writing process to the forefront by commenting on verb tenses using terms "conditionnel" and "futur" in parentheses to set them aside from the narrative. The solution to this was relatively easy; however, I would imagine that English-speaking readers are probably less likely to be familiar with discussing grammatical terms for verb tenses than their French-speaking counterparts. Another example that also falls into the

discussion of self-reflexive word play appears a bit further in this same chapter and is the first of several language comments that the narrator builds into her story. As Marie describes a woman's fling with a fireman selling calendars door-to-door, she mentions her spell checker suggesting alternatives to her word choices, like "encollé" instead of "enculé." Not only do such comments create a complexity to the narrative, they also force the translator into a tough position. How can this little word game be recreated for the English audience? Clearly the literal translations of these words "to paste" and "to fuck or to sodomize," respectively, are not the ideal solution. The possibilities were probably only limited to my own creativity. In any case, I came up with an alternative using "sticking" and "licking" (already suggested by a later passage in the novel) which may or may not be something a spell checker would realistically suggest, but it retains the similarity of spelling and the not so far off sexual connotations that the original trick employs. Even after working and reworking passages of this sort which occur frequently in Nimier's writing, even after setting them aside and returning to them months later, I am still not entirely satisfied with the solutions I have found. I am doubtful, but I think that, at least, it is better than cutting these parts out entirely.

Translating style through punctuation

Through the process of translation and particularly towards the end (even though the sample provided here is only forty-three pages, I have continued to work on the novel and have recently completed a very rough first draft translation of the entire book) as I became more experienced in writing as well as translating, I began to consider more carefully a fourth challenge to my work: how to interpret Nimier's writing style. This was a topic that had been discussed between my advisor and me over a year ago, but I had

found it a nebulous concept, one that I could never quite get my mind around. How do you pin down an author's style so that it can be reproduced in the translation? Some translation theorists like Joan Boase-Beier promote the concept of cognitive stylistics. My understanding of this theory is that because "reading is a cognitive process" (74) involving a change in mental state, the translator must attempt to recreate for her reader the same reading experience as that of the text's original reader. The idea is to do this by recreating the author's "mind style" (76). A theory of this kind tends toward giving the translator greater freedom in interpreting meaning so long as this original reading interaction is rendered in the target text; the mind style of the translator is to resemble that inferred to be the author's. From my own translation experience, I see the attempt to approximate authorial style as both a limiting and freeing approach to translation. On the one hand, it may allow the translator to venture further from literal translation in order to nail down the intended effect. On the other hand, the desire to reproduce style may also hold the translator even closer to the original, depending on the languages in question. After working with *La nouvelle pornographie* and moving it from French into English, I have come to see punctuation as a good example of style questions in translation. In this case, it is an example of how reproduction of style may tie the translator even closer to the source text. Punctuation is an important aspect to Marie Nimier's style, especially in this particular novel where it reveals a great deal about the state of mind of the narrator as her mental condition slowly deteriorates with the writing of these commissioned pornographic stories. In other words, in *La nouvelle pornographie*, punctuation is really a kind of clue to understanding what's going on.

Although from my reading of other novels by Nimier, I have discovered that the creative use of punctuation characterises her writing in general, it is nevertheless worth mentioning that punctuation is also very much a tool in the writing of pornographic literature. In his book *Oeuvre de chair*, Gaëtan Brulotte devotes an entire section (within the larger discussion of writing) to the use of colons, semi-colons, parentheses, dashes, commas, and such, as a way of eroticising the text itself right down to these smallest details of punctuation (149). But even beyond the genre of pornoerotic writing, within all literature, punctuation plays a central role in style. In my search to understand punctuation rules, as my advisor and I debated my punctuation choices in the English translation, I began to look for references. I started out by asking other translators what references they used. From this question, I discovered that many translation scholars, like myself, use punctuation instinctively without any references to back them up. This first obstacle bothered me, but did succeed in stalling my research for several months. It then occurred to me that my colleagues in English literature probably would not find this a foreign topic. In fact, they might even find it essential. Rather than asking around, this time, I did a quick library search and uncovered a goldmine of information, some of which I intend to go back to for future pleasurable reading. Fortunately, I did make the time to check out one particular book whose title caught my eye: Noah Lukeman's *A Dash of Style: The Art and Mastery of Punctuation.* The purpose of Lukeman's book is not so much to enumerate the rules of punctuation as it is to serve as a guide for writers who want to master this crucial tool and thereby create better writing. Superficially, this seemed to have nothing to do with translation, but as an enthusiast of English literature I was intrigued. Not far into the reading, I realised that this has everything to do with my

work as a translator and a rewriter of someone else's texts. How can I rewrite an author's novel in English, if I have not understood how she is using punctuation (among other tools) to build her sentences, to create á very particular effect? This point was hit home for me when Lukeman quoted an English translation of Albert Camus' *L'étranger* to show a master writer at work. Even before Lukeman commented on it being a translation, I wondered about his choice of example. Did he even know how the original text was punctuated? Following his analysis of Camus' punctuation, Lukeman includes the following comment in parenthesis:

> [Keep in mind, though, that the above example is a translation from the French; quoting literature in translation – such as *The Stranger* – is inherently problematic, since numerous translators punctuate to their own fancy. That said, translators can only change a text so much, and Camus' intention remains. (25)]

To get back to my own translation fancies, for the most part, my inclination has been to directly reproduce Nimier's punctuation, in particular where it works the same way in English. However, Lukeman's book has made me reflect more on what effects an author can be trying to create with their punctuation. It could be to speed up the narrative or slow it down, to grab the reader's attention, to create a certain speaking style in a character or any number of other strategies. The point is that I needed to take a fresh look at my own interpretation of Nimier's writing in this respect, and to be more sensitive to the effect her "mind style" was creating for her readers. The opening paragraph of the novel is again a good example, this time, of the kind of passage I reviewed and decided to change regarding punctuation. In an earlier version, I had taken the liberty to break up a few of sentences in the paragraph. Here's what it looked like:

> In the stairwell, the walls were cracking, peeling. From beneath, a canary yellow undercoat had appeared. Aline had added her name beside the buzzer. She was sleeping in the nook I had formerly used as an office. A curtain hooked up around her bed separated it from the rest of the studio, a simple piece of fabric that she pompously

> baptised her "stage curtain", the pomp in the expression being more in what this hid from sight than in the curtain itself. "The peep-show's over", Aline would tease drawing it closed, which really meant the show would now go on backstage.

And now the original:

> Les murs de la cage d'escaliers s'écaillaient, révélant une sous-couche jaune poussin. Aline avait ajouté son nom près de la sonnette. Elle dormait dans l'alcôve qui me servait autrefois de bureau. Un rideau était accroché autour de son lit pour le séparer du reste du studio, une pièce d'étoffe à fronces ordinaires pompeusement baptisée *baldaquin*, la pompe dans l'occurrence n'étant pas à chercher dans ce qui se voyait, mais dans ce qui était caché – je tire mon baldaquin, disait Aline, ça voulait dire qu'elle allait tirer un coup. (11)

After reflecting more on the question of Nimier's mind style, and especially her unique approach to punctuating her writing, I later settled on a version closer to the original in this respect:

> **The walls of** the stairwell were **peeling away, revealing** a canary yellow undercoat. Aline had added her name near the buzzer. She was sleeping in the nook I had formerly used as an office. A curtain hooked up around her bed separated it from the rest of the studio, a simple piece of fabric pompously baptised her *stage curtain*, the pomp in the expression being more in what this hid from sight than in the curtain itself – **the peep-show's over, Aline would say**, drawing it closed, which really meant the show would now go on backstage. (19)

The dilemma of how to interpret punctuation is just one aspect to translating the style of the original, but it seems to me to tie into other important areas like syntax and level of language, although for brevity sake, I will not examine them here. A translator's interpretation of these aspects of the original text undoubtedly contributes to the transfer of the inferred meaning of the source text into its recreation through translation.

Translating meaning and sexual content

As I touched on briefly during my examination of the social and psychological difficulties I encountered while working on Nimier's novel, the translator of pornoerotica approaches the intimate relationship between writer and translator from a unique angle. In a sense, the pornoerotic translator's rapport with the author moves into regions un-

travelled by her colleagues in other genres. Not only does she cross into the mind of the source text's creator to attempt, through an extremely close reading, to draw meaning from the text, [and this reading in itself is not a simple task, as many scholars have pointed out, such as Sartre in *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*: "Aussi les cent mille mots alignés dans un livre peuvent être lus un à un sans que le sens de l'œuvre en jaillisse ; le sens n'est pas la somme des mots, il en est la totalité organique. Rien n'est fait si le lecteur (and I would add, the translator) ne se met d'emblée et presque sans guide à la hauteur de ce silence (51)"], but also the translator performing this "création dirigée" (52) must almost cross through the mind of this writer and into her body, in order to feel the sensations, to understand the movements, described in the pornoerotic narrative. To bring this point to life, I want to examine a small segment of translation within the sample here provided. On page 18 of *La nouvelle pornographie*, the narrator is in the middle of her Jolicoeur episode, describing the services of Freddy Picaud as she lies stretched out on the ironing board. One particular sentence in this sequence gave me trouble, as I simply cannot get my mind (or body) around what Nimier (or, perhaps more accurately, Marie) is trying to express. I could make something up, but it's delicate to do that in a sex scene, and may reveal more about my own experiences than clearly retell Nimier's story. Nimier's original reads: "J'avais envie qu'il me prenne la bouche, qu'il m'aspire le bout des seins, ou qu'il enfonce sa langue entre mes jambes en donnant de grands coups de tête…"(18). These "grands coups de tête" baffle me, making me wonder if I just haven't had the pleasure of experiencing this gesture. What am I missing here? In any case, I eventually settled with the translation "with big thrusts" (24), but it's certainly open to further debate, and I'm the first to admit this inadequacy. Situations of this sort are

plentiful in the translation – moments when my mind-body communication faltered and progress moved forward on shaky ground.

Just to return briefly to the discussion of lexicon, in the sex vocabulary encountered in *La nouvelle pornographie*, I found further challenges to my goal of transmitting sexual meaning between the source and the target text. On one side I see the French words in the original and on the other, the selection of English words at my disposal to replace them. This process often proved tricky. For example, in French there is the verb "se branler" that can be used for men or for women. I quite like its gender neutrality and its accuracy without going into unnecessary details. But my choices for an English translation were limiting: "to masturbate" (and what else?), perhaps "to stroke or touch oneself", maybe even "to play with oneself". Such a discussion brings to mind the already much debated translation of a word like *jouissance* into English. The translator of Barthes' *Le plaisir du texte*, Richard Miller, chose the word "bliss". Others might find this somehow lacking, incomplete.[12]

In any case, I have now arrived at a final issue in the question of translating sexual content: how does the translation's target audience view eroticism as compared to the audience of the source text. Do the differences in vocabulary used to describe sexuality and related acts reflect deeper cultural differences? Does a culture have its own unique way of perceiving sexuality? Its own erotic imagination? Sartre touches on this subject when he claims that: "...tous les ouvrages de l'esprit contiennent en eux-mêmes l'image du lecteur auquel ils sont destinés " (79). He uses the example of trying to explain the German occupation of France to an American reader – it will simply require a

[12] Richard Howard discusses this translation choice in his introduction to the 1975 English translation by Richard Miller. Von Flotow also comments on the translation of *jouissance* in *Translation and Gender*.

great deal more explanation to express what his French compatriot would sense between the lines. This is due to a different history, a different cultural life experience – differences which also apply to the experience of sexuality (attraction, courting, physical arousal). Feminist translators have felt this and have tried to create words to fill in the English gaps, a prime example being Lotbinière-Harwood's English use of "cyprin" (Flotow 18) derived from the French "cyprine." The great challenge for the translator of pornoerotica is to navigate this in-between space where the sexual imagination of cultures converge and diverge. Translation in this genre has the potential to introduce new ways of conceiving sexuality and desire, depending on the translator's choice to carry through the "otherness" of the original. This question of transmitting "otherness" leads nicely into the final practical issue I will address in this second half of the commentary: domestication versus foreignization.

A final question: domestication versus foreignization?

It seems that current trends in translation theory and practice are pushing away from Venuti's call for foreignization in the 1990s. More recently, theories like cognitive stylistics propose an easier reading experience for the foreign target audience, at least one neither more nor less difficult than that posed by the original text to its home audience. It seems to me that this renewed focus on domesticated translations is somehow related to current world politics in which the foreign has become suspect and foreigners a threat to national security. There is a cold, assimilating wind blowing around the globe running very much contrary to global warming. However, the question of domesticating or foreignizing a text is a complex one, and I do not wish to delve fully into its convolutions in this particular discussion. There is just a small but sometimes nagging detail in the

translation process that I want to briefly mention under this heading because it was, for me, a question close to my heart. That is, what to do with certain foreign words in the text that refer to real places and events? Retaining some French words and references seemed to me a way to maintain an important link between the original text and my own. Since it is a love of the French language that initially brought me to translation, I was naturally little inclined to erase all traces of the foreign origins of my translation. It was easy enough to keep Paris as the novel's setting – everyone knows Paris. But should I keep names of hospitals, markets, magazines or newspapers? There is even a (in)famous insane asylum for women, *la Salpêtrière*, mentioned toward the middle of the novel. Without the convenience of footnotes (the objective was to keep these minimal) to help my reader, what was the best solution? I wasn't even sure if the French article should be used when keeping proper names – the "le", "la", "les." For instance, on page 40 of the original *Le Réverbère* is mentioned. Aside from the difficulty of discovering what this actually is, I wondered: should I keep the "Le?" Should it be dropped? What about when the narrator uses English words here and there, as she does during the story on the airplane with the Japanese man? Should those be reversed into French in the translation? I did try to keep my potential English readers in mind, but felt nevertheless remarkably distant from this unknown, possibly non-existent shadow reader. I was saddened by the loss of words like "*l'Hexagone*" which referred to France in a way that English readers would probably not understand. In the end, I think the most important thing is to be consistent, but really I think the simplest approach is to hope for a publisher to demand one thing or another to give a stamp of finality to this never-ending debate. It is a small detail, but as the saying goes – "the devil is in the details."

Conclusion

> A un certain moment, les circonstances, c'est-à-dire l'histoire, sous la figure de l'éditeur, des exigences financières, des tâches sociales, prononcent cette fin qui manque, et l'artiste, rendu libre par un dénouement de pure contrainte, poursuit ailleurs l'inachevé.
> Maurice Blanchot, *L'espace littéraire* (10)

The winter term draws to a close with longer, sunnier days. In the wind's warm whisper of spring, I see a glaring truth – there is really nothing quite like a looming deadline in mid-April to bring seemingly endless thesis writing to its uncertain climax. It reminds me of a short quote of William Zinsser's that I found in Lukeman's *Dash of Style*: "There's not much to be said about the period except that most writers don't reach it soon enough" (34). Could this also apply to scholars and conclusions?

I can sense the end in sight: I am translating the last pages of *La nouvelle pornographie* and beginning a final revision of the translation sample. The commentary is slowly piecing itself together as if of its own accord, and often, in spite of my gloomy mood swings. Soon my laptop (which for some bizarre reason overheats on a regular basis as I am translating this pornoerotic novel) will have a rest.

Though I have not discussed my thesis project in detail with any family members (other than my spouse and, just lately, my youngest sister), my thirteen year old daughter has finally caught on to a strange pattern in my reading material and has recently enquired as to why all the books I read have nude people on the covers. I have attempted an explanation along the lines of: these cover pages are a hint about the content so that readers do not end up accidentally reading something that offends them. Pornography? she asks me, but isn't that films and things like that? I further explain that it all began with literature, and we leave it at that, for now. It's my own translator's version of what

Marie goes through writing her porno stories. She writes: "...les proches sont tellement susceptibles, tellement lointains en vérité. L'intimité détruit le discours sur l'intimité" (147).

A conclusion: the ideal place to draw together my research and experiences, a place to make some sense of the past two years spent studying female-authored pornoerotica and its interaction with feminism and translation, topped off by half a year immersed in the process of translation. I have discovered with great satisfaction the intimate relationship between reading, translating and writing; I have rediscovered my passion for both feminism and pornoerotic literature; and at one and the same time, I have plunged myself back into a world of learning that in and of itself brings me enormous pleasure. Yet, in reality, I have uncovered as many questions as conclusions (both academic and otherwise). Newly interested in polysystem theory, I am keen to compare the role that female-authored pornoerotica plays in the English literary system as opposed to the French or even the Spanish system. Furthermore, I am interested in discovering patterns of translation within this genre: what gets translated? into which languages? under what conditions? Are cultural norms about sexuality and women reflected in the answers to these questions? Where exactly is feminism with regard to female sexuality and pornoerotica in the new century? How might the study of pornoerotic literature in translation overlap with research in other disciplines like sociology, psychology, cultural studies, women's studies? In fact, I seem to have uncovered a passion that could easily consume a lifetime of study. In the end, I can only hope that perhaps I will eventually get used to talking about sex, that I'll become more comfortable with the unavoidable self-

exposure that is reading, translating and (re)writing. After all, it's good sometimes to take a few risks, "de se mouiller," as Aline would say.

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